

ABSTRACT

William B. Herring, III The Battle of Bentonville: March 19-21, 1865.
(Under the direction of Dr. William N. Still, Jr.) Department of History, December 1982.

The purpose of this thesis is to undertake a detailed study of the battle of Bentonville from its beginning on March 19, 1865, until its conclusion on March 21, 1865. I also feel it is important to set the stage for this battle by describing the course of events which preceded and were the ultimate cause of this confrontation taking place. This small hamlet named Bentonville was not just the scene of "the last dying gasp of breath" for the Confederacy. This conflict was important for many reasons. Bentonville represented a flicker of hope for a desperate Southern cause. This was the only serious attempt made by the South to stop General Sherman on his march north from Savannah, Georgia to Goldsboro, North Carolina. This fact contains a great irony for the reason that the battle of Bentonville need not have taken place. General Sherman himself admitted that a small force placed strategically along any of the crossings of any of the five large rivers between Savannah and Goldsboro could have made reaching his destination almost impossible. However, these questions are to be left to war game strategists. Bentonville surely did take place and represented an agonizing attempt by General Joseph E. Johnston to gather the scattered armies throughout many Southern states. These fragmented divisions were but skeletons of what were once proud armies. The fact that these troops had never

fought together as a unit before made the chances of success even more remote. Johnston's army had been given orders by General Robert E. Lee to stop a veteran Union force which had swept through the South and in a matter of months and had left an unprecedented path of destruction in its wake.

Many of the South's premier military personalities participated in the battle of Bentonville. Some of those present included Braxton Bragg, D. H. Hill and Wade Hampton, who was Jeb Stuart's successor. However, several of these commanders were conspicuous for previous failures on the battlefield and in their ability to cooperate with each other.

Bentonville represented the last full-scale action of the Civil War where a Confederate army would be able to choose its own ground from which to stage a battle. This conflict became the largest battle ever to be fought on North Carolina soil in any war.

The main thrust of this paper has to be the military aspects of the battle. However, to set this study apart from previous works, the effect of this conflict on the citizenry of the town of Bentonville and the surrounding area in Johnston County has been examined. The impact of approximately 100,000 troops from two hostile armies suddenly converging on a quiet agrarian town was catastrophic. The lives and property of these people were thrown into total disarray in a period of three days. Placing this study in the context of local history will bring to light heretofore neglected accounts of this war-ravaged area.

The chances for a Confederate victory at Bentonville were slim from the beginning. The odds were made even greater when General John

Schofield's army, numbering 23,000 men, captured Goldsboro. The conflict which centered upon the little town of Bentonville was truly the South's "last stand."

X THE BATTLE OF BENTONVILLE: X

MARCH 19-21, 1865

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of History

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Arts in History

by

William B. Herring, III

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THE BATTLE OF BENTONVILLE:

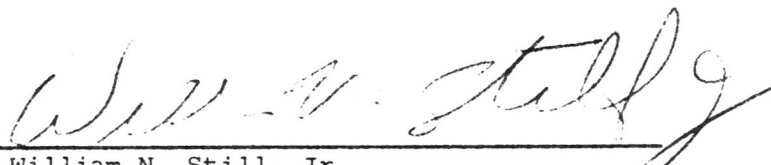
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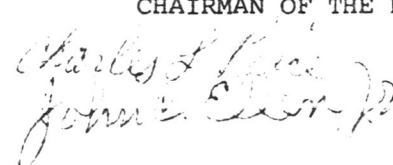
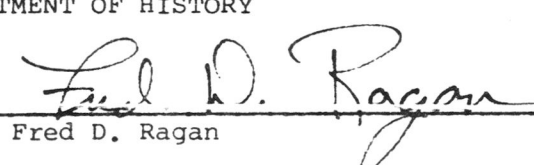
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I am also indebted to my typist, Carolyn Samet, whose efficiency, especially in the last few months of this paper, made a successful completion possible.

Last, but surely not least, I would like to recognize my great grandfather, Thomas Jefferson Herring, who served as a captain of Company B, Fifty-first North Carolina Regiment at the Battle of Bentonville. The courage shown by the Confederate troops present at this conflict was especially commendable in the face of such great adversity.

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PRELUDE TO THE BATTLE OF BENTONVILLE

The bloodiest chapter in the history of our nation had entered into its fifth year. Up until 1864, both the Union and Confederate armies had experienced victories, the advantage not really resting with one side or the other. Blessed with an array of very capable commanders, the South had successfully fought a numerically superior and better equipped Union army. Furthermore, the war had been fought primarily along the peripheral areas of the Confederacy; in Northern Virginia and along the Mississippi River. The heartland of the South had been spared the ravage of invading armies, and slavery, that institution so dear to Southern landowners, remained intact.

The entire situation in the South had changed by the beginning of 1865. President Lincoln had declared that a house divided could not stand, and he had every intention to see that the Union was preserved, no matter what the cost. Time after time he had introduced new generals to command the Army of the Potomac, hoping to find a commander who could match the leadership of Robert E. Lee. Finally, a general named Ulysses S. Grant had shown unusual aggressiveness and Lincoln's wishes began to come true. General Grant succeeded in bottling Lee's elusive army up at Petersburg, Virginia and had begun to seige operations. Problems for the South intensified when a very "cocky" and determined general named William T. Sherman succeeded in capturing Atlanta. In the process, this much heralded Union commander had succeeded in cutting a path of destruction through the heart of the

Confederacy in late 1864 and early 1865 which considerably lessened the will of the Southern people to fight.

General Sherman's philosophy of combat was that of "total war."

This belief called for the complete devastation of the land through which his army was marching. His troops became self-sufficient by supplying their needs for food and livestock from the countryside. This practice was necessary for several reasons: His army had no supply line because it was marching through enemy territory. Furthermore, anything which was consumed by his men would not fall into the hands of the Confederate army. The result was extreme hardship for civilians as well as the military. Morale began to fall on the battlefield because of the burning and pillaging which had taken place in the deep South. Consequently, the rate of desertion increased markedly, especially among Lee's troops in Virginia.

On December 22, 1864, General Sherman succeeded in capturing the city of Savannah, Georgia. He presented it to President Lincoln as a "Christmas gift." This latest victory was the result of a march which had created a sixty mile wide path of destruction in its wake.

Upon capturing Savannah, General Sherman was forced to make an important decision as to how he would unite his troops with General Grant's army near Richmond. The concentration of the two armies against the exhausted and ill-supplied army of Lee was thought to be sufficient to shift the tide of victory toward the United States. General Sherman stated in a letter to Grant: "My four corps, full of experience and

of ardor, coming to you en masse, equal to sixty thousand fighting men, will be a reinforcement that Lee cannot disregard."¹

Sherman changed his mind several times in making this important decision. He first opted for a march overland as was made evident in a letter he wrote to General Grant in December 1864. "Indeed, with my present command I had expected, after reducing Savannah, instantly to march to Columbia, South Carolina; thence to Raleigh, and thence to report to you. But this would consume, it may be, six weeks time . . . whereas by sea, I can probably reach you with my men and arms before the middle of January."² The prospect of reaching Richmond in two weeks seemed most logical after such a grueling campaign. However, General Sherman was not known as a commander who took the easy alternative. In the final result, the strategist in him won out. He believed that his "total war" policy would have a more desired effect if he led his army north on a march through the Carolinas. General Grant was more desirous of the sea voyage but changed his mind when he realized that Sherman wished to do that which was best for his army, which had fought so well together. Grant stated, "I did think the best thing to do was to bring the greater part of your army here and wipe out Lee. The turn of affairs now seem to be taking has shaken me in that opinion."³

¹William T. Sherman, Memoirs of William T. Sherman (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 2 volumes, 1875), II, 209, hereinafter cited as Sherman, Memoirs.

²Sherman, Memoirs, II, 209.

³Sherman, Memoirs, II, 223-224.

Sherman was also concerned that transportation by sea would disturb the unity and morale of his men.⁴

General Sherman believed his army was invincible after the "march to the sea." He wished to use this formidable tool to further crush the South. General Grant was convinced of Sherman's abilities and the news of General George Thomas's victory over John Hood's army at Nashville, Tennessee was further incentive to permit Sherman to launch his Carolinas campaign. Grant gave his final approval to Sherman in a letter written on December 27, 1864. "Your confidence in being able to march up and join this army pleases me, and I believe it can be done. The effect of such a campaign will be to disorganize the South and prevent the organization of new armies from their broken fragments."⁵

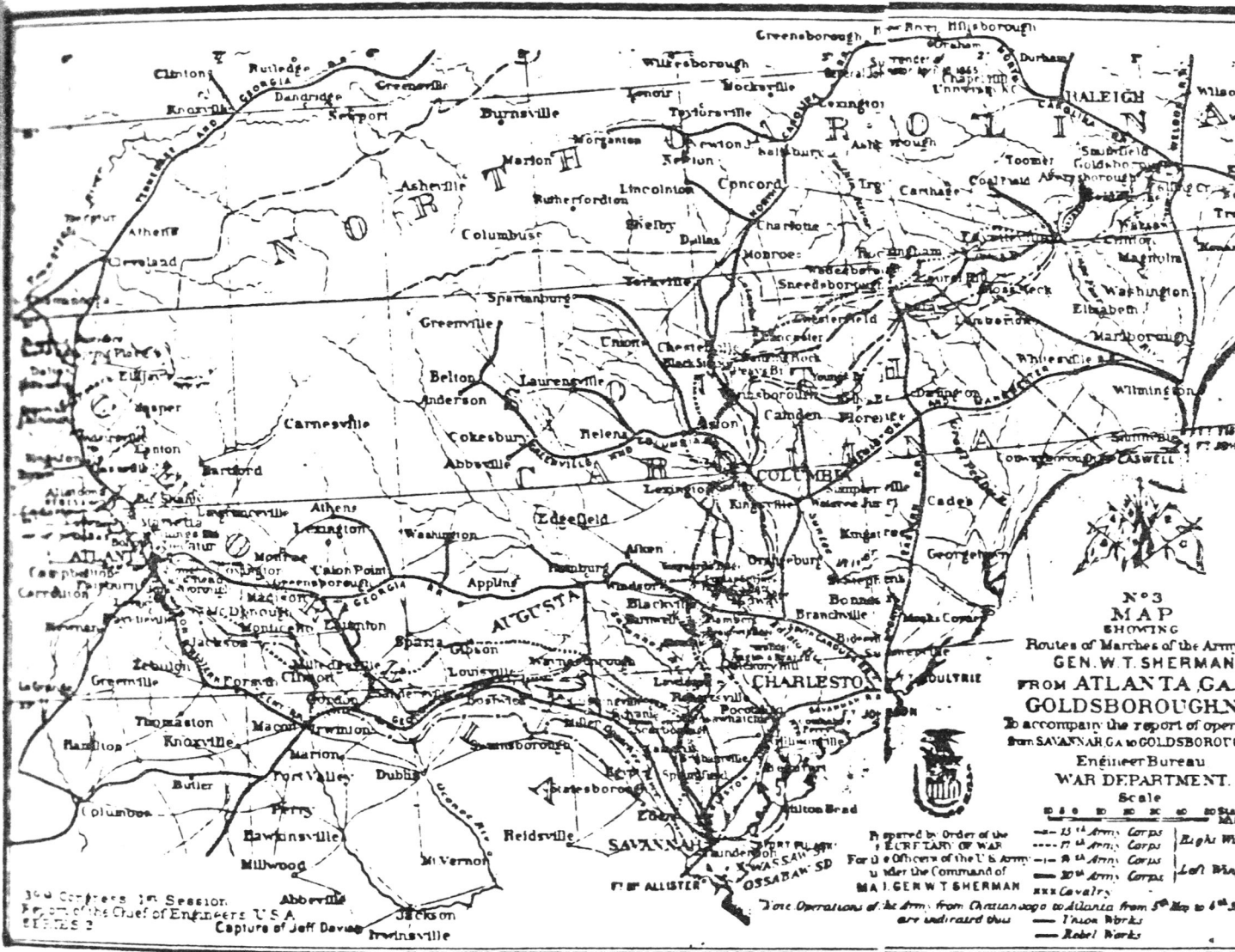
General Sherman had faced great odds in his march through Georgia. However, he believed that the forthcoming campaign through the Carolinas would prove to be much more challenging and important. "I simply moved from Atlanta to Savannah, as one step in the direction of Richmond, a movement that had to be met and defeated, or the war was necessarily at an end. Were I to express my measure of relative importance of the march to the sea, and of that from Savannah northward, I would place the former at one, and the latter at ten, or the maximum."⁶

It was at this juncture of time that the focal point of the struggle between the North and the South shifted to North Carolina. Several

⁴Sherman, Memoirs, II, 224.

⁵Sherman, Memoirs, II, 237.

⁶Sherman, Memoirs, II, 220-221.



SHERMAN'S CAROLINAS CAMPAIGN (from The Official Atlas of the Civil War, Plate LXXVI)

events of great magnitude took place in the winter of 1865 which would seal the fate of the Confederacy.

General Sherman decided to march from Savannah to Goldsboro, North Carolina. "Goldsboro was a point of great convenience for ulterior operations, by reason of two railroads which meet there, coming from the sea-coast at Wilmington and New Berne."⁷ Actually three railroad systems met in Goldsboro. They were the Wilmington and Weldon, the Atlantic and North Carolina, and the North Carolina Railroad. If this city could be captured, General Lee's main line of supply would be severed.

The distance from Savannah to Goldsboro was approximately 425 miles. General Sherman believed it would take six weeks to cover the distance.⁸

By January 1865, the Union blockade of the east coast had begun to limit goods arriving at major Southern ports. Fewer and fewer blockade runners were slipping through the Union squadron situated off the mouth of the Cape Fear River. Most of those which successfully made it into Wilmington did so under the cover of darkness.

President Lincoln began to realize late in the war how important it was to capture Wilmington and stop the flow of supplies which constantly moved to Lee's army in Virginia via the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad. The only way to accomplish this was to capture the strong defenses of Fort Fisher.

⁷ Sherman, Memoirs, II, 272.

⁸ Sherman, Memoirs, II, 272.

This focus of Union activity on North Carolina began to take its toll. It was here that the South made one last ditch effort to free itself. The Confederate answer to Sherman's march north was at first very confused. General P. G. T. Beauregard was first placed in charge of assembling troops to stop Sherman. His choice of locations to accomplish this changed from Chester, South Carolina, to Charlotte, Greensboro, and Salisbury in North Carolina in a matter of days. Rapid deployment of Confederate troops depended largely on the railroads and Southern military commanders hoped Sherman's route of advance would be close to these transportation lines.⁹

By February 1, 1865, Sherman's army had been resupplied and the march began. The organization varied little from the veteran army which had captured Atlanta. It was divided up into two wings. The left was commanded by Major General Henry Slocum and the right by Major General Oliver O. Howard. General Judson Kilpatrick's cavalry corps was attached to the left wing.

The right wing consisted of the Fifteenth Corps and was led by Major General John A. Logan and the Seventeenth Corps was commanded by Major General Frank P. Blair. The left wing included the Fourteenth Corps, commanded by Major General Jefferson C. Davis, and the Twentieth Corps led by General Alpheus S. Williams.

On the matter of troop strength, Sherman stated on February 1 that, "the actual strength of the army was sixty thousand and seventy-nine

⁹R. N. Scott and others (eds.), The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (Washington: Government Printing Office, 128 volumes, 1880-1901), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 1209-1210, 1222-1223, 1238, hereinafter cited as Official Records (Army).

men, and sixty-eight guns."¹⁰ The supply trains consisted of approximately twenty-five hundred wagons, with six mules pulling each wagon. There was also six hundred ambulances brought along to carry the sick and wounded. The supply wagons contained enough ammunition to fight one large battle. Furthermore, "there was forage for about seven days, and provisions for twenty days, mostly of bread, sugar, coffee, and salt, depending largely for fresh meat on the hoof and such cattle, hogs, and poultry, as we expected to gather along our line of march."¹¹

General Sherman knew that the march through the coastal plains of South and North Carolina would prove difficult during the spring of the year. Rivers were swollen from heavy rains and the movement of thousands of men and wagons over the same roads was treacherous. Therefore, he split the wings of his army to march on separate but parallel roads. If trouble developed, they were always in a position where they could join each other.

The mired conditions of the roads required that a process known as corduroying be undertaken. This enabled vast amounts of weight to be transported by splitting saplings and trees in half and placing them face down in the road so that they provided somewhat of a hard surface. This process was crude at best, but it served its purpose.

On February 15, 1865, an event occurred which helped pave the way for success in Sherman's campaign north. Fort Fisher was captured by a combined land and sea invasion. The general stated his feelings on

¹⁰Sherman, Memoirs, II, 269.

¹¹Sherman, Memoirs, II, 269.

this important success: "The capture of Fort Fisher has a most important bearing on my campaign because it gives me another point of security on the seaboard."¹² On February 22, the port city of Wilmington fell. With the Cape Fear River defenses knocked out and the port of Wilmington closed, another important Confederate stronghold was removed. Wilmington could be used as a port of supply for Sherman's army and if Fayetteville could be captured, a direct link from the seacoast to the interior could be established. This would prove all important by the time Sherman's force thrust into the Tar Heel state because the rivers of eastern North Carolina were large enough to be navigated by steam boats.

Grave concern struck at the hearts of the military as well as civilians throughout the South. To whom could General Lee turn to stem the tide of Sherman's invasion and subsequently open an escape route for his beleaguered army at Petersburg? He felt his only choice was General Joseph E. Johnston. Not only did Lee believe this to be true but also several prominent political leaders held this contention. Many members of the Confederate Congress including Senator Wigfall of Texas, urged President Davis to give Johnston this command. General Lee's confidence in Johnston won out. In a special order dated February 22, 1865, Lee wrote, "Assume command of the Army of Tennessee and all troops in the Department of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. Concentrate all available forces and drive back Sherman."¹³

¹²Sherman, Memoirs, II, 258-259.

¹³Robert E. Lee to General Joseph E. Johnston, February 22, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series II, XLVII, Part II, 1247.

General Johnston had formally commanded the Army of Tennessee after the fall of Vicksburg. However, he was relieved of command after the loss of Atlanta to Union forces in September 1864. He had come under sharp criticism from President Davis who believed Sherman could have been prevented from capturing this important Southern city. There were many, however, who believed General Johnston was not to blame and continued to believe in his ability to lead. A cavalryman in General Joseph Wheeler's Corps of the Army of Tennessee stated his convictions on this subject after the war, ". . . While around Atlanta if Johnston had been left alone, Sherman would never have gotten to the sea."¹⁴

It was known by most people in prominent positions in the Confederate government that President Davis doubted the leadership qualities in General Johnston. However, the Confederacy was in very difficult straits and experienced generals were not easy to find. Davis conceded to the wishes of his supreme commander but did so in a way which demonstrated his contempt for Johnston, ". . . in his new position these defects which I found manifested by him when serving as an independent commander will be remedied by the control of the general-in-chief."¹⁵

Upon, hearing of his restoration to command, Joseph Johnston was not at all optimistic of his chances of stopping Sherman. He stated that: "It is too late to expect me to concentrate troops capable of driving back Sherman. The remnant of the Army of Tennessee is much

¹⁴O. P. Hargis Reminiscences, 1861-1865, microfilm copy, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, hereinafter cited as Hargis Film.

¹⁵Jefferson Davis to Col. James Phelan, March 1, 1865, Official Records Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 1303.

divided. So are other troops. Is any discretion allowed?"¹⁶ The news of the capture of Columbia and Charleston, South Carolina within the same week in February, further dampened Johnston's hope of a successful campaign. He had indeed been shouldered with a very unenviable job.

General Johnston was at his residence in Lincolnton, North Carolina when he received notice of his appointment. He immediately traveled to nearby Charlotte to confer with General P. G. T. Beauregard, who had been designated as second in command. General Lee had sent a dispatch to Beauregard which further explained the chain of command. "I have directed General J. E. Johnston to assume command of the Southern army and to assign you to duty with him. Together I feel assured you can beat back Sherman."¹⁷ Johnston conveyed his doubts to General Beauregard of the prospects of stopping or severely crippling Sherman's army. Nor could he see much chance of aiding General Lee at Petersburg. "I accepted it with no other hope than of contributing to obtain favorable terms of peace, the only one that a rational being could then entertain. For the result of the war was evident to the dullest, although General Lee's matchless skill and resolution were still maintaining his position against the great Federal power."¹⁸

¹⁶ J. E. Johnston to Robert E. Lee, February 22, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 1247.

¹⁷ R. E. Lee to General G. T. Beauregard, February 22, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 1248.

¹⁸ Albert T. Rice (ed.), "My Negotiations with General Sherman," The North American Review, 143 (August, 1886), 183, hereinafter cited as Rice, "My Negotiations with General Sherman."

General Johnston's doubt for a successful campaign was overshadowed by the excitement which resulted from his reinstatement to command. His appointment caused a revival in spirits throughout the Confederacy. One Southerner testified:

To those who had followed him from First Manassas to Atlanta without once suffering a defeat, although forced into some costly retreats, he was one of the War's top strategists. The long, unbroken series of defeats, retreats, and fruitless skirmishes had left a trail of hopelessness and defeatism. But then came a feeling that perhaps all would end now. The Raleigh Progress reported that thousands of soldiers absent without leave had returned to fight under their old chieftain. Instead of demoralization the Richmond Whig observed hopefully that, "the Army of Tennessee is now buoyant and follow with pride the standard of their former commander whom they seem to love and revere as children do a father."¹⁹

The Richmond Examiner also complimented Johnston. "There will be jubilee in the army, and that gallant remnant of that once fine army of Tennessee . . . will feel equal to double duty."²⁰

Soldiers are clearly the best qualified to attest to the ability or inability of their commander to lead in battle. They are the ones who will live or die on a given day because of orders given by him. One of General Johnston's officers had this to say, "I consider Joseph E. Johnston his [Robert E. Lee] equal, if not his superior, as a military commander. Johnston possessed a 'magnetic personality' which was felt

¹⁹ John M. Gibson, Those 163 Days: A Southern Account of Sherman's March from Atlanta to Raleigh (New York; Coward-McConn, Inc., 1961), 186-187, hereinafter cited as Gibson, Those 163 Days.

²⁰ Gibson, Those 163 Days, 187.

even to the lowest private, and made him eager for a fight if Johnston led, certain that the end would be victory for them."²¹

The North was in a state of elation as a result of all of the recent victories won by their armies in the South. Washington, D.C. was no exception. "On February 22, as Sherman marched north from Winnsboro, South Carolina, President Lincoln ordered lights turned on in the dome of the capitol in Washington, and multitudes marched through the streets singing and shouting, in celebration of the victory at Columbia, Wilmington, and Charleston."²²

In late February, General Johnston began exhaustive measures to gather all available Confederate troops which were dispersed throughout many Southern states, and mobilize them into an effective fighting force. In an urgent letter to General Lee on February 25, Johnston demonstrated his concern in locating sufficient troops. "Your order to me to concentrate all available forces and drive back Sherman implies, of course, that you regard those forces as adequate to the object and their concentration in time practicable."²³ After surveying available numbers and locations of troops, Johnston found, ". . . the infantry was in four

²¹J. W. Ratchford, Some Reminiscences of Persons and Incidents of the Civil War (Austin: Shoal Creek Publishers, 1909), 37-38, hereinafter cited as Ratchford, Some Reminiscences.

²²Earl S. Miers, The General Who Marched to Hell (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951), 317-318, hereinafter cited as Miers, General Who Marched to Hell.

²³J. E. Johnston to R. E. Lee, February 25, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 1271.

bodies, at long distances from each other."²⁴ It required considerable investigation to ascertain exactly where all of the troops were located. He concluded that

the available forces are Hardee's troops arriving at Cheraw by railroad and estimated by General Beauregard at 12,000. Also, Lee's Corps, Army of Tennessee, near Charlotte, 3,500; Stewart's Corps, Army of Tennessee, 1,900 near Newberry, South Carolina. These troops, except [William] Hardee's, have only the means of transporting cooking utensils, and, therefore, cannot operate far from railroads. The cavalry under Lieutenant-General [Wade] Hampton, amounts to about 6,000. In my opinion, these troops form an army too weak to cope with Sherman. If our troops and those of General Bragg can be united in time, the progress of Sherman's army might be stopped, otherwise it may unite with that of Schofield. This junction of our forces might be made near Fayetteville.²⁵

General Johnston originally estimated all available cavalry to number approximately 6,000. However, this number of mounted soldiers could never be gathered. The total finally mustered was about 4,000 men. The infantry strength never totaled more than 15,000 men. Thus, the combined strength of Johnston's army was less than 20,000 men.²⁶

General Johnston appealed to General Lee for more troops: "Would it be possible to hold Richmond itself with half your army, while the other half joined us near Roanoke to crush Sherman?"²⁷ In a returned dispatch Lee stressed that he could not spare any men. "At this time nothing could be sent from here to your assistance, but should the enemy

²⁴Rice, "My Negotiations with General Sherman," 184.

²⁵J. E. Johnston to R. E. Lee, February 25, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 1271.

²⁶J. E. Johnston to R. E. Lee, March 18, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 1426.

²⁷J. E. Johnston to R. E. Lee, March 1, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 1298.

reach the Roanoke, I should endeavor to unite with you to strike him, or if the opportunity occurred, to attack General Grant if he follows me rapidly."²⁸

It was imperative that the widely scattered Confederate units were concentrated in North Carolina as rapidly as possible because they were in danger of being cut off by Sherman's army, rapidly advancing through South Carolina at that time. A large number of the men were retiring in front of the Federal columns in order to harass them and slow their progress. These Confederate units consisted of General Steven D. Lee's Corps, which numbered 3,000; Stewart and Benjamin Cheatham, 3,200 men; Lieutenant General Hardee's 11,000 troops; and cavalry about 6,000. General Hardee's troops marched north after their evacuation of Charleston. Unfortunately, only half of this sizable force would reach North Carolina because many of them were ill-conditioned and badly equipped from being on prolonged garrison duty.²⁹

The disorganization of the troops was amplified by the fact that the Confederate command could not ascertain which route General Sherman would take north. Raleigh seemed a likely destination since it was the capital but then Charlotte was a possibility also.³⁰ In late February, General Beauregard circulated an appeal to the inhabitants

²⁸ R. E. Lee to General Joseph E. Johnston, February 23, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 1257.

²⁹ J. E. Johnston to General R. E. Lee, February 23, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 1257.

³⁰ P. H. Winston, Jr. to Vance, March 14, 1865, Governors Papers, Zebulon B. Vance, Archives, Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, hereinafter cited as Governors Papers, Vance.

of the Charlotte area to prepare for an invasion. "To delay the advance of the enemy until our troops can be massed in strength to crush them, I appeal to all good and patriotic citizens in the region of the country threatened by the enemy to turn out in full force all available labor, with axes, spades, and mattocks, to destroy and obstruct roads leading toward Charlotte from the south."³¹ This confusion was exactly what General Sherman had hoped for. He purposely kept his route a secret while he was deep in enemy territory.³² This tactic of marching north in different directions had precipitated the military evacuation of Charleston.

The civilian population was just as concerned about the route Sherman would take as was the military. Stories of burning, murder, and pillage covered the front pages of leading Southern newspapers. Many believed that the Confederacy was doomed, and even the most diligent efforts to save it would be futile in a matter of months. Nearly five hundred women from North Carolina signed a petition and sent it to Governor Vance, imploring "that immediate steps may be taken for the establishment of peace. Let this horrid war end! Let blood cease to flow!"³³ Governor Vance received a barrage of appeals to end the fighting from many quarters. One woman sent the following anonymous appeal:

³¹ Appeal of General G. T. Beauregard to all citizens, February 23, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 1265.

³² Sherman, Memoirs, II, 292.

³³ Richard E. Yates, "Governor Vance and the End of the War in North Carolina," North Carolina Historical Review, XVII (October, 1941), 319, hereinafter cited as Yates, "Vance and the End of the War."

For the sake of suffering [sic] women and children, do try and stop this cruel war. here [sic] I am without one mouthful to eat for myself and five children and God only knows where I will get something now you know as well as you have a head that it is impossible to whip they [sic] Yankees, therefore I beg you for God sake to try and make peace on some terms, and lest they rest of they poor men [sic] something to eat, my husband has been killed, and ef [sic] they all stay till they are dead, what in they [sic] of God will become of us poor women and children?³⁴

The wave of despondency among the people soon spread to the Confederate armies and thousands of Tar Heel soldiers quietly slipped away and went home. Late in February, 1865, General Lee declared that prevailing attitude of defeatism among the North Carolinians was having a profound effect on his army. Lee wrote, "The state of despondency that now prevails among our people is producing a bad effect upon the troops. Desertions are becoming very frequent and there is good reason to believe that they are occasioned to a considerable extent by letters written to the soldiers by their friends at home."³⁵ Samuel Walkup, a soldier in the Forty-eighth North Carolina regiment summed up the fears of his comrades stationed in trenches around Petersburg: "I am in agony of suspense to hear from home. It has been nearly a month since I left them and have received no letter since. Between them and our forces I can only look Heavenward for comfort."³⁶ Walkup further

³⁴ Anonymous letter of January 10, 1865, Governors Papers, Zebulon B. Vance, January-May 1865.

³⁵ R. E. Lee to His Excellency Z. B. Vance, February 24, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 1270.

³⁶ Samuel H. Walkup Diary, March 6, 1865, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, hereinafter cited as Walkup Diary.

wrote, "Deserters increase . . . we had three more last night."³⁷ General Lee believed the problem could not be solved on the battlefield so he appealed to Governor Vance to take necessary steps to help stem this troublesome situation. He wrote, "I think good can be accomplished by the efforts of influential citizens to change public sentiment and cheer the spirits of the people."³⁸ It was reported that ". . . in a ten-day period, 1,094 Southerners disappeared from Petersburg trenches."³⁹

In early February, 1865, General John M. Schofield was sent to North Carolina to assume command of all forthcoming Union operations in the entire state. General Sherman ordered him to be responsible for opening up the railroad lines from the ports of Morehead City and Wilmington inland to Goldsboro. At this point it could be ascertained what Sherman's major objective in North Carolina was: "My instructions . . . made the ultimate object of my operations the occupation of Goldsboro, the opening of railroad communications between that point and the sea coast, the accumulation of supplies, and the junction of my force with your main army at or near Goldsboro."⁴⁰

As soon as General Johnston learned of Schofield's presence in North Carolina he became acutely aware that he was threatened from the

³⁷ Walkup Diary, February 21, 1865.

³⁸ R. E. Lee to His Excellency Z. B. Vance, February 24, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 1270.

³⁹ James I. Robertson, Narrator, The Concise Illustrated History of the Civil War (Gettysburg: The National Historical Society, 1972), 50, hereinafter cited as Robertson, Illustrated History.

⁴⁰ J. M. Schofield to Maj. Gen. W. T. Sherman, April 3, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 909-910.

south and the east.⁴¹ Even though Schofield commanded a total force as large as his, Johnston knew he had to attempt to halt General Sherman's veteran army first.

By March 1, 1865, time was growing painfully short for General Johnston's mobilization efforts. Sherman's army was nearing North Carolina and Confederate forces, although on their way, were still widely scattered. The Confederate command desperately needed to know what route Sherman's army planned to take through North Carolina. His ultimate destination was not in doubt, however, as correspondence between General Johnston and Beauregard explained:

Sherman's ultimate objective point is doubtless Richmond, before which he expects to form a junction with Grant, forcing General Lee either to evacuate Virginia or to accept battle at great disadvantage. . . . His intermediate objective points are possibly Fayetteville, and certainly Raleigh and Petersburg. His present position (at or near Camden, S.C.) . . . indicates a purpose to avoid Charlotte and move on Fayetteville, either directly, or through Wilmington by way of Cheraw or Florence. . . .⁴²

Since Charlotte was virtually ruled out as part of the route Sherman had chosen, General Johnston believed Fayetteville was a good point to strike the Union army. The main concern was the concentration of enough Confederate troops there to serve this end. Ultimately the the inability to transport these men caused this plan to be scrapped from all of the possible alternatives.⁴³

⁴¹G. T. Beauregard to General Joseph E. Johnston, March 1, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 1299.

⁴²G. T. Beauregard to General Joseph E. Johnston, March 1, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 1298-1299.

⁴³Z. B. Vance to General B. Bragg, March 3, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 1298.

Faulty reconnaissance was another problem which hampered General Johnston's campaign. One result of this was that Johnston badly underestimated the size of Sherman's army. He projected its effective strength at 35,000 men which was half of what the actual number was.⁴⁴

The citizenry in the central and eastern sections of North Carolina were alerted to the prospect of a Union invasion. Precautionary steps including the removal of slaves from plantations as a security measure were undertaken. Governor Vance wrote to General Bragg, "I hope you will induce all slave owners in Duplin, New Hanover, and Onslow counties to remove immediately all able-bodied slaves in this direction, as will likely afford recruits to the enemy."⁴⁵ Full cooperation from the plantation owners was hoped for, but in the event objections surfaced, the Confederate Army was given authority by the governor to remove them by force. The slaves were to be transported by rail to Raleigh. Further orders were issued to civilians residing along Sherman's supposed line of march, ". . . to remove temporarily all of their supplies and animals at least twenty miles to the right or left of his flank routes."⁴⁶

General Johnston had difficulty in obtaining adequate supplies, particularly food, for his troops. Eastern North Carolina was already

⁴⁴G. T. Beauregard to General Joseph E. Johnston, March 1, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 1298.

⁴⁵G. T. Beauregard to General Joseph E. Johnston, March 8, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 1318.

⁴⁶G. T. Beauregard to General Joseph E. Johnston, March 1, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 1347.

depleted. There were rations to feed sixty thousand men for four months, stored in various railroad warehouses between Weldon, Charlotte, and Danville.⁴⁷ However, Johnston had little success in obtaining any of this food as a special order from the Confederate Government specified: "The subsistence already collected and in the depots of North Carolina must not be issued or retained for General Johnston's army. The army of Northern Virginia requires every pound of subsistence now collected."⁴⁸ Unfortunately, Lee's starving troops would never use this vast store of food because it could not be transported to them.⁴⁹

As important logistical problems were discharged by members of Johnston's staff, specifically General Beauregard, the various elements of the scattered Confederate units attempted to converge as quickly as possible on North Carolina. General Joseph Wheeler's Confederate cavalry, who as before-mentioned retired north, just ahead of the Federal columns, attempted to keep General Johnston informed of any changes in its direction of march. A soldier in the Tenth North Carolina Battalion described the conditions experienced by the Confederate troops in their withdrawal up through South Carolina:

Many rivers and swamps coupled with the cold rainy season and poorly clothed men, was distressing and none but the strongest could withstand it. We passed many fine plantations at which many evidences of Southern patriotism were shown by the ladies, such as strewing peanuts and sweet

⁴⁷Charles L. Price, "The Railroads of North Carolina During the Civil War" (unpublished master's thesis, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1951), hereinafter cited as Price, "Railroads," 189.

⁴⁸I. M. St. John to Major Moore, March 5, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 1326.

⁴⁹Price, "Railroads," 190.

potatoes along the roadside for the soldiers. They evidently knew what the Yankees would do when they came, for columns of smoke by day, and lurid fire lights by night . . . in the rear indicated their destructive line of march.⁵⁰

General Sherman defended the methods by which his army "lived off of the land." General Manning Force would later give a precise description of how supplies were gathered by the "bummers":

[It] was a vital necessity in this campaign. The foragers, called "Sherman's bummers" performed a service without which the army could not have advanced. . . . In the Seventeenth Corps, the forage detail for each regiment consisted of one officer and about a dozen enlisted men varying with the size of the regiment. In the morning every detail reported to the provost marshall of the division before leaving camp. They went in advance of the column and scoured the countryside for ten miles out from the flanks, often went further out. Visiting plantations, they gathered supplies and when necessary captured wagons to bring supplies into camp. At first they went out on foot but before long they were all mounted. Gathering subsistence was not the only service rendered by the foragers. They enveloped the marching column with a wide spread cloud of skirmishers which the enemy could not push through. They were thoroughly imbued with confidence in the invincibility of Sherman's army.⁵¹

As General Sherman's columns crossed over into North Carolina on March 8, he immediately issued commands by which his army would conduct itself. Contrary to what most of the residents feared, Sherman did not intend to desecrate the people and their homes as he had in Georgia and South Carolina because it was reported that Union sentiment was widespread in the state. In a Special Order he directed that:

All officers and soldiers of this command are reminded that the State of North Carolina was one of the last states that passed the ordinance

⁵⁰ Charles S. Powell, *Reminiscences*, 1916, unpublished reminiscences in the North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, hereinafter cited as Powell, *Reminiscences*.

⁵¹ Lansing H. Beach, "The Civil War Battle of Bentonville," *The Military Engineer*, XXI, No. 115 (January-February, 1929), 24, hereinafter cited as Beach, "Battle of Bentonville."

of secession, and that from the commencement of the war there has been in this state a strong Union party. Her action on the question of secession was undoubtedly brought on by the traitorous acts of other States, and by intrigue and dishonesty on the part of her own citizens. The act never even met the approval of the great mass of her people. It should not be assumed that the inhabitants are enemies to our government, and it is to be hoped that every effort will be made to prevent any wanton destruction of property, or any unkind treatment of citizens.⁵²

Sherman hoped to avoid further hostilities with the Confederate army. This was reflected in a letter written by the general as he crossed into the Tar Heel state: "Though willing now to fight Joe Johnston, who commands in chief, I would prefer to . . . make junction with Schofield, who is doubtless working up toward Goldsboro."⁵³ Sherman, though confident that his army could overcome any problems, preferred not to engage the enemy, at least until he had resupplied his tired and ragged troops.

By mid-March, Confederate intelligence reported that it was their belief that Sherman's army would march on Goldsboro rather than Raleigh. "I think from present indication, that Sherman designs forming a junction with Schofield at Goldsboro, using New Berne as a base of supplies."⁵⁴ Now was the appropriate time for General Johnston to plan a strategic attack to stop Sherman. The Confederate commander decided to concentrate his troops at Smithfield. This small railroad town afforded a convenient rendezvous point because of its location halfway

⁵² Robt. P. Dechert to all officers, March 7, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 719.

⁵³ W. T. Sherman to General Kilpatrick, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVIII, Part II, 721.

⁵⁴ E. E. Portlock, Jr. to Col. R. H. Chilton, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 1363.

between Raleigh and Goldsboro. In the event that the invading Union army decided to swing toward Raleigh, a quick movement could be made in that direction via the North Carolina Railroad.⁵⁵

On March 11, 1865, Sherman's army marched into Fayetteville. As the Union army filed into one end of the town, General Joseph Wheeler's Confederate cavalry rode out of the other end, burning the bridge across the Cape Fear River. This was carried out to retard the movement of the Union troops whether they moved towards Raleigh or Goldsboro. This was an act which had repeatedly been carried out by Confederate cavalry in front of Sherman's troops as they marched north from Savannah. A Confederate diary noted: "We stopped at all the principal rivers after burning the bridges, and prepared for battle. This was kept up through North Carolina as far as Averysboro."⁵⁶

Fayetteville did not fare well as the Union forces virtually tore the town apart. The Confederate arsenal [formerly the Federal arsenal] was destroyed as well as the courthouse, printing offices, cotton mills and many other homes and places of business.⁵⁷

The capture of this river town meant the realization of one of Sherman's original objectives. He had established contact with the coast via the Cape Fear. General Sherman took full advantage of this

⁵⁵ Joseph E. Johnston, Narrative of Military Operations, Directed During the Late War Between the States, by Joseph E. Johnston, General, C.S.A. (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1874), 382, hereinafter cited as Johnston, Narrative of Military Operations.

⁵⁶ Powell, *Reminiscences*.

⁵⁷ Yates, "Vance and the End of the War," 325.

artery of communication. Besides receiving some supplies by steamboats from Wilmington, Sherman decided to unburden his army of the hordes of Negroes and other camp followers who had tagged along in the wake of his march north from Savannah. These people had consumed vast amounts of supplies along the way. General Howard's command alone loaded 4,500 men, women, and children onto boats where they were subsequently shipped to Wilmington. Not only had these people become dependent on the Union army for handouts, but they slowed the progress of the march.⁵⁸

By March 15, Sherman's Michigan Engineers had completed a pontoon bridge across the Cape Fear River. This enabled the march toward Goldsboro to commence once again. The people of Fayetteville were very glad to see the bluecoats depart as one observer wrote: "The horrid deeds perpetrated by the Yankees . . . exceed the enormities of Barbarians."⁵⁹

General Johnston believed his only chance to stop Sherman was to in some way divide the Union army and attack each part separately. Since the Confederate army was numerically inferior, Johnston planned to isolate one of the two advancing wings and crush it before the other one could come to its aid.⁶⁰ As it turned out, the deplorable condition of the roads leading from Fayetteville to Goldsboro caused General Sherman to divide his army into two sections. General Judson Kilpatrick

⁵⁸ Marion T. Plyler, "Sherman's Movements in North Carolina," North Carolina University Magazine, XXIII (November, 1905), 101, hereinafter cited as Plyler, "Sherman in North Carolina."

⁵⁹ Yates, "Vance and the End of the War," 324.

⁶⁰ John G. Barrett, Sherman's March Through the Carolinas (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1956), 149, hereinafter cited as Barrett, Sherman's March.

was ordered to move up the plank road beyond the village of Averysboro, keeping on the east bank of the Cape Fear River. The rest of the troops was ordered to take a shorter and more direct route to Goldsboro.⁶¹

General William J. Hardee had been instructed to keep scouts on the west side of the Cape Fear so as to keep General Johnston informed of the route of the Union march. Late, during the afternoon of March 15, Kilpatrick's Union cavalry encountered General Joe Wheeler's troops, who constituted the rear guard of Hardee's Corps.⁶² What began as a rear guard action between the two opposing sides, blossomed into a nasty skirmish. The battle of Averysboro which started on March 15th continued. Fighting continued the following day with the Fourteenth and Twentieth Corps, until General Hardee was informed that the enemy had crossed Black River and was outflanking him on the left. By that time the Confederate Corps under the command of Generals D. H. Hill and Robert Hoke arrived from Kinston, where they themselves just days earlier had also encountered a Union army in a skirmish known as the Battle of Southwest Creek. With the assistance of these Confederate troops and Wheeler's cavalry, General Hardee abandoned his position and retired toward the town of Elevation, which was close to Smithfield. The loss in killed and wounded on both sides had been considerable.⁶³

⁶¹Barrett, Sherman's March, 149.

⁶²J. Wheeler to General Joseph Johnston, Synopsis from March 1-April 15, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 1130.

⁶³Johnston, Narrative of Military Operations, 383. Union casualties for this skirmish were reported as 682 killed, captured, or missing. Confederate casualties are unclear.

The indecisive clash near Averysboro had accomplished one of Johnston's objectives. General Hardee had been able to detain the Union Twentieth Corps in battle while the right wing continued toward Goldsboro. Preparations for a full-scale battle were initiated by General Johnston at that time.

On March 17, intelligence reports confirmed that Sherman's army was definitely not marching toward Raleigh.⁶⁴ General Johnston immediately ordered all available Confederate commands to converge on Smithfield to prepare for a confrontation. Johnston had already set his headquarters up at the home of William Hastings in that town.

Transportation continued to plague Johnston's efforts to concentrate his troops in front of Sherman. He appealed to Governor Vance to try to use his office to help with this problem. "The railroad has brought us in the past 13 days, but some 500 men a day. We have troops at Salisbury, as well as wagons and teams, waiting for transportation."⁶⁵

Fortunately, a portion of the Confederate army had already reached Smithfield. General Bragg had General Robert F. Hoke's division of North Carolinians. This comprised a force of 4,775 men. These ranks were made up almost entirely of troops who had formerly garrisoned Forts Caswell, Campbell, Holmes, and Johnston; all located near Wilmington. They had evacuated the forts when General Terry captured Fort Fisher. Also present was a portion of the Army of Tennessee under the command

⁶⁴ Wade Hampton to General Wheeler, March 16, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 1403-1404.

⁶⁵ J. E. Johnston to Governor Vance, March 17, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 1407.

under the command of Lieutenant General A. P. Stewart. The number of his troops on hand amounted to 3,550.

It was about daybreak on the morning of March 18 that General Johnston received word from General Wade Hampton that the Federal army was definitely marching toward Goldsboro. Furthermore, it was divided, with one wing considerably ahead of the other. Hampton sent more detailed information by stating that

the right wing, on the direct road from Fayetteville, had crossed Black River; the left wing, on the road from Averysboro had not reached that stream, and was more than a day's march from the point in its route opposite to the hamlet of Bentonville, when the two roads, according to the map of North Carolina, were ten to twelve miles apart. The hamlet itself is about two miles from the road and to the north of it, and sixteen from Smithfield. According to the reports of our cavalry, the Federal right wing was about half a day's march in advance of the left; so that there was probably an interval of a day's march between the heads of the two columns.⁶⁶

General Sherman was evidently once again attempting to confuse Johnston as long as possible as to his destination. An officer in the Eighty-sixth Illinois Regiment, Fourteenth Corps, wrote, "It was necessary to dislodge Hardee at Averysboro that our army might have the use of the Goldsboro Road, as also to keep up the feint on Raleigh as long as possible."⁶⁷

On March 18, Sherman received reports suggesting that Confederate troops were concentrating in front of his advancing columns. He sent off a dispatch to General Howard that stated, "I think the enemy is

⁶⁶ Johnston, Narrative of Military Operations, 384-385.

⁶⁷ John R. Kinnear, History of the Eighty-sixth Regiment Illinois Volunteer Infantry During Its Term of Service (Chicago: Tribune Co., 1866), 102-103, hereinafter cited as Kinnear, History of the Eighty-sixth Regiment.

concentrated about Smithland [Smithfield] and I cannot make out whether Goldsboro is held in force or not."⁶⁸

The prospect of further conflict ahead was something which Sherman's tired troops hoped had ended with the clash near Averysboro. For the first time since leaving Savannah, the army had found the land much easier to live from. One Union soldier recalled, "The march was continued in the direction of Bentonville, over a country rich with forage of every kind except molasses--a luxury we are not often without. Meal and meat were to be had in abundance."⁶⁹

Provisions were not hard to find but the weather continued to hamper travel. The Goldsboro road was becoming increasingly mired from the weight of hundreds of wagons and thousands of men. One infantryman from the Eighty-Sixth Illinois gave a vivid description of the conditions: "The worst of roads and you can hear the wounded groan and yell out going over the rough places."⁷⁰ Confederate troops marching towards Bentonville from the opposite direction were not in any better condition. One officer wrote, "No footware for soldiers. Roads very bad."⁷¹

⁶⁸W. T. Sherman to O. O. Howard, March 18, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 885.

⁶⁹Kinnear, History of the Eighty-sixth Regiment, 102-103.

⁷⁰Diary of Allen L. Fahnestock, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library at Chapel Hill, hereinafter cited as Fahnestock Diary.

⁷¹Lafayette McLaws Papers, March 18 entry, Order Book, 1865, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, hereinafter cited as McLaws Papers.

General Johnston felt that the time was ripe to strike the Federal columns, regardless of existing conditions. He estimated that the two Union wings were approximately a day's march from each other.⁷²

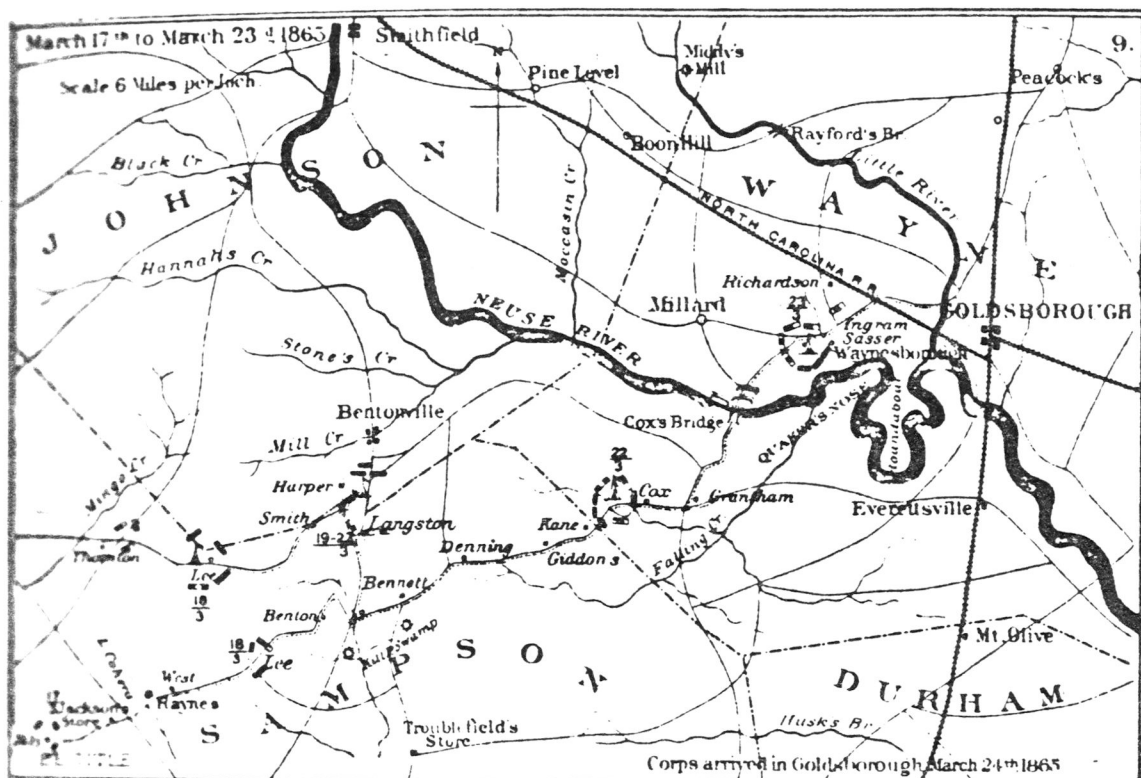
At approximately 12 A.M. on the morning of March 18, General Wade Hampton, who was at the front near Bentonville, received a request from General Johnston, about sixteen miles away, for full information as to the advisability of attacking the enemy. Hampton reported that "the Fourteenth Corps was in his immediate front; the Twentieth Corps was on the same road, five or six miles in the rear, while the other two Corps, Logan's and Blair's, were on a parallel road some miles to the south, and the place where he camped was an admirable one for a contemplated attack."⁷³ Hampton was instructed to delay the enemy as long as possible to allow Johnston to concentrate his army.

During the morning, Johnston ordered General Hardee's troops, resting at the town of Elevation, to march immediately to Bentonville. The same orders were issued to the troops in Smithfield. All troops were told to camp that night between the hamlet [Bentonville] and the road on which the left Federal column was marching.⁷⁴ Bentonville was located just twenty-five miles west of Sherman's destination.

⁷²Barrett, Sherman's March, 159.

⁷³Walter Clark (ed.), Histories of the Several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina in the Great War, 1861-'65 (Raleigh and Goldsboro: State of North Carolina, 5 volumes, 1901) III, 194-195, hereinafter cited as Clark, Histories of the North Carolina Regiments.

⁷⁴Johnston, Narrative of Military Operations, 385.



BENTONVILLE AND VICINITY (from The Official Atlas of the Civil War, Plate LXXX)

The maps of the area which had not been updated since 1854, proved very disruptive to the whole plan of operation for the Confederates.⁷⁵ General Johnston later stated that they ". . . deceived me greatly in relation to the distance between the two roads on which the Federal columns were marching which it exaggerated very much, and that from Elevation it reduced almost as much."⁷⁶ Johnston's assumption that General Howard's right wing was lagging one day behind General Slocum's left wing proved incorrect. Furthermore, the map also indicated that General Hardee's troops who had just been ordered to leave Elevation, were close enough to reach Bentonville by the night of the 18th. Both of these assumptions were wrong and would prove very costly.

During the morning on March 18, Confederate headquarters received word from General Hardee that he was unsure of the route he had been directed to proceed upon. It stated, "Your order directing me to put my command in motion immediately for Bentonville will be promptly obeyed, but I am ignorant of the road you designate, and that must be found."⁷⁷ Apparently Hardee had used incorrect maps also. This meant he would not arrive in Bentonville according to expectations. Fortunately, Generals Bragg and Stewart's troops would reach Bentonville during the night.

⁷⁵ George W. Nichols, The Story of the Great March from the Diary of a Staff Officer (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1865), 262, hereinafter cited as Nichols, Story of the Great March.

⁷⁶ Johnston, Narrative of Military Operations, 385.

⁷⁷ W. J. Hardee to Colonel Anderson, March 17 [18?], 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, Part II, 1427.

On March 18, Johnston informed General Lee of his effective troop strength. "The troops will be united to-day, except two divisions of Cheatham's corps not yet arrived. Effective totals, infantry and artillery: Bragg 6,500; Hardee, 7,500; Army of Tennessee, 14,000."⁷⁸ Johnston's total fighting force on this date was approximately 18,000 men.

In reply, Lee once again stressed to Johnston the extreme importance of thwarting Sherman's drive north:

If you are forced back from Raleigh, and we be deprived of the supplies from East North Carolina, I do not know how this army can be supported. . . . I will state that the supplies in Virginia are exhausted. The enemy has succeeded in cutting off the Weldon Railroad. . . .⁷⁹

As the Confederate troops marched from Smithfield and Elevation throughout the 18th to reach Bentonville, General Hampton had followed his instructions to engage Sherman's troops so as to slow their progress. He had moved his cavalry forward until he met the Union columns. A lively skirmish ensued in which he dismounted his men to afford them more cover in the woods. The Confederates were slowly pushed east down the Goldsboro road by the numerically superior Federal troops. By the afternoon they had reached the position which General Hampton had previously selected for battle. As it was of vital importance that this strategic point be held until the Confederate infantry under Johnston arrived, Hampton had his men throw up light entrenchments across the road where they made a stand until darkness set in. Both sides then

⁷⁸ J. E. Johnston to General R. E. Lee, March 18, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, Part II, 1426.

⁷⁹ R. E. Lee to General J. E. Johnston, March 15, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, Part II, 1395.

then withdrew for the night. The Union army camped four miles west of the designated battlesite on the Averysboro-Goldsboro road.⁸⁰

The battleground selected by Hampton was on the eastern edge of the Cole plantation, extending a mile and a half to the west, and lying principally on the north side of the Goldsboro road. The area was almost completely surrounded by dense thickets of blackjack oak and pine.⁸¹ The ground was high, which presented unusually good terrain to set up artillery positions.⁸² The Confederate army had its rear flank protected by several deep creeks and streams which afforded protection against surprise attack.⁸³ Johnston could not have ordered a better location to attempt to stop a numerically superior army such as that which Sherman presented.

General Johnston arrived in the town of Bentonville late in the afternoon of March 18. He established his headquarters south of the town between it and the proposed battlefield. Hampton then briefed him, ". . . on the general situation, and suggested a plan of action for the following day."⁸⁴

⁸⁰Wade Hampton, "The Battle of Bentonville," Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, edited by Robert V. Johnson and Clarence C. Buel (New York: T. Yoseloff, Second Edition, 4 volumes, 1888), IV, 701-702, hereinafter cited as Hampton, "Bentonville."

⁸¹Johnston, Narrative of Military Operations, 385.

⁸²Gibson, Those 163 Days, 220.

⁸³George W. Pepper, Personal Recollections of Sherman's Campaigns in Georgia and the Carolinas (Zanesville: Hugh Dunne, 1866), 377-378, hereinafter cited as Pepper, Personal Recollections.

⁸⁴Jay Luvaas, "Johnston's Last Stand--Bentonville," North Carolina Historical Review, XXXIII (July, 1956), 335, hereinafter cited as Luvaas, "Bentonville."

A dispatch was received from General Hardee late that night which stated that he, with Generals McLaws and Taliaferro's divisions had marched all day but would not reach Bentonville that night. They were forced to camp at the Snead house, five miles northwest of Bentonville. Hardee assured Johnston he would break camp early on the 19th to complete the remainder of the march.⁸⁵

Fifty-eight year old General Joseph E. Johnston was still ill-prepared for battle. Numerous problems still plagued his army. The various Confederate divisions had never fought together before. Many of the units consisted of artillerymen who had formerly garrisoned coastal forts and who were experiencing difficulty deploying on open ground. To make matters worse, the Army of Tennessee had arrived without its cannon and wagons.⁸⁶ Morale was at a low ebb throughout the Confederate army, especially in some units. General Hoke's division of North Carolinians was especially hard hit because of their recent defeat near Kinston and the sheer exhaustion they felt from continuous marching.

The quick move to concentrate an army to stop Sherman had created what appeared to be unsurmountable problems. However, Johnston had no alternative but to make a stand on the following day.

⁸⁵ Archer Anderson to Lieutenant-General Stewart, March 18, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 1427.

⁸⁶ Smithfield Herald (Smithfield), February 14, 1958, hereinafter cited as Smithfield Herald.

BACKGROUNDS OF THE COMMANDERS AT BENTONVILLE

This was a colorful array of famous generals, both Confederate and Union, which had converged on the small town of Bentonville with their ragged armies. The people of the southern area of Johnston County had never before witnessed such an array of famous men. Many of these generals had shaped the course of events which were at that very time determining the outcome of the Civil War.

A majority of these commanders wearing the blue and gray had received their military training at West Point, and a few had even taught there before the war. Several had been classmates and had developed close friendships before the clouds of secession had required that they choose a side with which to take up arms. These men now found it their plight to attempt to destroy each other and their homelands. The fact that many of these generals from opposing armies had received the same military training from the same instructors and books was and still remains one of the great ironies of this conflict.

General Sherman believed that General Johnston would not strike his army when he had come so near to reaching his destination. These two leaders had become very familiar with one another's strategic abilities the year before in the campaign from Chattanooga to Atlanta. Both men had great respect for each other's capabilities on the battlefield. On this occasion, though, Sherman had been "out-generaled."

Justice would not be served in the undertaking of this study if the backgrounds of these famous or outstanding military personalities

and their subordinate officers were not surveyed. The deeds and exploits of these men had covered the front pages of every Northern and Southern newspaper since the war's inception.

General Joseph Eggleston Johnston, a native of Farmville, Virginia, had been a classmate of Robert E. Lee's at West Point. He had served with great distinction in the Seminole and Mexican Wars. Johnston was wounded five times in the latter war and was brevetted three times.¹ When Virginia seceded from the Union in 1861, Johnston resigned from the Federal service as Quartermaster General and became a brigadier general in the Confederate Service.² His first engagement took place in the battle of First Manassas and for his gallant leadership there, was given the rank of full general on August 31, 1861. Johnston then played a role in preventing General Irwin McDowell from succeeding in his peninsular campaign in Virginia.³ President Davis gave Johnston the command of the Army of Northern Virginia. At this point in time, he was still ranked below Generals Sidney Johnston, Samuel Cooper, and Robert E. Lee in seniority. As a result of this situation, Joseph Johnston believed a disservice had been done to him. Letters of dissatisfaction were written and a great stir ensued throughout the

¹ Ezra J. Warner, Generals in Gray; Lives of the Confederate Commanders (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), 161-162, hereinafter cited as Warner, Generals in Gray.

² Bell I. Wiley, Embattled Confederates: An Illustrated History of Southerners at War (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 55, hereinafter cited as Wiley, Embattled Confederates.

³ George F. Rozell, "General Joseph E. Johnston," Confederate Veteran, IV (December, 1896), 429, hereinafter cited as Rozell, "General Joseph E. Johnston."

Confederate government and in military circles. President Davis took offense and from this time forward until the end of the war, a hostile atmosphere existed between the two men. The Southern cause would be hampered by this dislike of the President for General Johnston.⁴

General Johnston's next conflict as the commander of the Army of Northern Virginia was the battle of Seven Pines where he was wounded in May, 1862. His command was relinquished to General Robert E. Lee while he was recuperating. Upon returning to active duty, Johnston did not have his command returned to him as he had expected but instead President Davis gave him the command of the department of the West. Johnston was very proud, sensitive, and hardheaded and wanted to remain in the eastern theatre to defend his native state of Virginia.⁵ However, the needs of the Confederacy took precedence. As commander of the Department of the West, Johnston participated in the Vicksburg Campaign. The loss of this fortress might have been prevented if General Pemberton had not disobeyed General Johnston's orders to not withdraw the Confederate army from the trap.⁶

After the fall of Vicksburg, Johnston was given the command of the Army of Tennessee. This occurred just after General Braxton Bragg's debacle at Chattanooga. Johnston once again lost favor with President Davis with his plan of strategic withdrawal in front of Sherman's

⁴Wiley, Embattled Confederates, 56.

⁵Wiley, Embattled Confederates, 56.

⁶Rozell, "General Joseph E. Johnston," 429.

advance into Georgia.⁷ Johnston subsequently lost the command of his army to General Hood. Upon hearing this news, General Sherman was delighted. Sherman was quoted as saying, "I will whip that army. Atlanta is mine."⁸ He then changed his plan of tactics because he was sure Hood was much less an adversary than "Old Joe" Johnston.⁹

Johnston probably received more blame for following a Fabian policy in his retreat before Sherman than he really should have. In fact, many officers praised him for his tactical skill. However, General Johnston came under such heavy criticism from the Confederate political hierarchy in late 1864 that he decided to leave active service. However, the South's military fortunes continued to deteriorate and the name of Joseph Johnston was constantly brought up by leading Confederate senators as well as the military leadership in Richmond. Not only was he an unemployed ranking general, but there was widespread belief that this man's abilities were unused as a consequence of a prejudice the president felt for him. As a result of endorsements from Robert E. Lee, who was then supreme commander of all Southern troops, and a petition signed by fifteen senators, Davis reluctantly reinstated Johnston to active Confederate service. He was given command of the battered Army of Tennessee in February, 1865 with the responsibility of stopping

⁷ Warner, Generals in Gray, 161-162.

⁸ Rozell, "General Joseph E. Johnston," 429.

⁹ Rozell, "General Joseph E. Johnston," 429.

¹⁰ Wiley, Embattled Confederates, 56; Warner, Generals in Gray, 162; Rozell, "General Joseph E. Johnston," 429.

Sherman's drive north to join Grant in Richmond.¹¹ General Lee had considerable faith in Johnston's capacity as a leader: "I know of no one who had so much of the confidence of the troops and people as General Johnston. . . ." ¹²

Johnston accepted this command with great reluctance. The student of war can imagine the feeling which pervaded his mind upon being called back into active service in early 1865 by a president who greatly disliked him. At the outbreak of hostilities in 1861, Johnston had resigned his position as the ranking officer in the United States Army with the exception of Winfield Scott, and was regarded as a genius in the art of war.¹³ The South needed his talents and he had unselfishly beckoned to that call. Throughout the course of the war, petty differences had caused Johnston to be superseded or removed from command by President Davis. Now, when the cause of the South was in its "ebb tide" he was being asked to save the Confederacy from disaster.

One Major Ratchford, a soldier under Johnston, probably summed up the state of affairs most effectively: "The fact that he accepted his command, is a better commentary on the nobility of his nature than I can make."¹⁴ Once again, however, the ever diligent Johnston rose to this challenge and gave this assignment his best effort. During

¹¹Gilbert E. Govan and James W. Livingwood, A Different Valor: The Story of General Joseph E. Johnston, C.S.A. (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1956), 340-341, hereinafter cited as Govan and Livingwood, A Different Valor.

¹²Govan and Livingwood, A Different Valor, 346.

¹³Rozell, "General Joseph E. Johnston," 429.

¹⁴Ratchford, Some Reminiscences, 45.

the weeks of preparation to stop Sherman, Johnston was described as "small, soldierly, and graying, with a certain gamecock jauntiness."¹⁵ The South, and especially a bitter Jefferson Davis, needed every bit of military talent it could muster at this time. If Johnston could defeat Sherman, the South might prolong the war through the summer of 1865 and perhaps persuade Northern public opinion that the South could not be subjugated. General Lee's army was nearly incapacitated. Thus, deliverance for the Confederacy now rested squarely on the shoulders of Joseph Johnston. In the words of General George McClellan, the right person had been chosen for the occasion. "Gen. Johnston could plan a campaign and fight a battle equal to the great Napoleon."¹⁶

The Army of Tennessee was a skeleton of its former self by the time the battle of Bentonville took place. It had been practically destroyed by General Thomas at the battle of Nashville. This once proud army was divided into three decimated corps. Lieutenant General Alexander P. Stewart, better known to his troops as "Old Straight," commanded one veteran corps of 4,500 men. Stewart, a Tennessean, was forty-five years old at the time of Bentonville. After his graduation from West Point, he was subsequently offered a teaching position there in mathematics which he accepted.¹⁷ Stewart resigned his teaching position in 1845 to take a similar job at Cumberland University in

¹⁵ Douglas Southall Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants: A Study in Command (New York; Charles Scribner's and Sons, 4 Volumes, 1942), I, xxxviii, hereinafter cited as Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants.

¹⁶ Rozell, "General Joseph E. Johnston," 429.

¹⁷ Mark M. Boatner, The Civil War Dictionary (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1959), 798-799, hereinafter cited as Boatner, Civil War Dictionary.

Tennessee. He became active in politics, being an antiseccessionist whig before the war, but subsequently volunteered for the South when the Civil War began. He was appointed brigadier general in November, 1861, and was assigned to a brigade under Leonidas Polk's command with the Army of Tennessee. He fought gallantly in the battles of Shiloh, Perryville, and Stones River in the Kentucky Campaign.¹⁸ Stewart was promoted to major general in June, 1863. In the battles of Chattanooga and Chickamauga, he served with General William Hardee's Corps. He was commissioned a lieutenant general in June, 1864, and took command of Polk's corps. He kept this rank throughout the Carolinas campaign.

Major General Benjamin F. Cheatham commanded another one of the corps in the Army of Tennessee at the battle of Bentonville. However, because of railroad delays in Salisbury, North Carolina, he and most of his troops would not arrive on the battlefield until March 21. Not only was the delay of troops to prove very costly for Johnston's plan of attack, but artillery and wagons equal to one hundred and twenty carloads had clogged the lines back into South Carolina.¹⁹ Cheatham, like his counterpart, A. P. Stewart, was a native of Tennessee. He was forty-five years old at the time of Bentonville. He received his military training as a colonel with the Tennessee Volunteers in the Mexican War. He was appointed brigadier general in the Confederate army in July, 1861. Cheatham was promoted to major general in the

¹⁸ Warner, Generals in Gray, 294.

¹⁹ Robert C. Black, The Railroads of the Confederacy (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1952), 297, hereinafter cited as Black, Railroads.

spring of 1862. He distinguished himself in the Army of Tennessee in every engagement from the battle of Shiloh to Atlanta.²⁰ After the battle of Franklin, General Cheatham was accused of dereliction of duty by General Hood which resulted in a bitter controversy between the two men throughout the remainder of the war.²¹

By the time of the battle of Bentonville, Lieutenant General Daniel Harvey Hill, at the age of forty-five, had possibly become the ablest general holding his rank in the Confederate army. Many of his subordinates believed that this man did not know the meaning of fear. In the thick of battle, Hill would sit out in an exposed place on his horse, one foot thrown across the pommel of his saddle, surveying the action.²² Born in South Carolina, he attended West Point and graduated with the celebrated class of 1842. He took part in the Mexican War and earned two brevets for gallantry.²³ Hill returned from this war and took a teaching position at Washington College and in later years did the same at Davidson College. He became Superintendent of the North Carolina Military Academy in 1859, where he remained until the opening of hostilities in 1861. Hill had married into an illustrious family. Stonewall Jackson was his brother-in-law by marriage. These ties enhanced his military career.²⁴

²⁰ Warner, Generals in Gray, 47-48.

²¹ Warner, Generals in Gray, 48.

²² Wiley, Embattled Confederates, 47.

²³ Warner, Generals in Gray, 136-137.

²⁴ Boatner, The Civil War Dictionary, 401.

At the beginning of the Civil War, D. H. Hill was ranked colonel of the First North Carolina Infantry. He was appointed brigadier general in July, 1861. He commanded in the battle of Big Bethel Church and subsequently became a major general in March, 1862.²⁵ He next fought in the battles of Yorktown, Williamsburg, and Seven Pines under the command of Joseph Johnston. Hill distinguished himself at Second Manassas and Sharpsburg. In 1863, he took command of the Department of North Carolina. While General Lee was involved at Gettysburg, Hill defended Richmond. In July, 1863, Hill was promoted to a lieutenant general and was ordered to join the Army of Tennessee under the command of Braxton Bragg. His first duty was to lead a corps in the battle of Chickamauga. At this time he became very critical of Bragg's abilities as a field commander, going so far as to request the removal of Bragg from service in the field. These accusations backfired when President Davis, who always showed great favoritism toward Bragg, turned on Hill and refused to raise his grade in rank.²⁶ This controversy tended to end Hill's rise in military prominence throughout the remainder of the war.²⁷ In early 1865 he was given command of a division of General S. D. Lee's corps of the Army of Tennessee at the battle of Bentonville.

Lieutenant General William J. Hardee was in command of the Department of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida during the battle of

²⁵ Warner, Generals in Gray, 137.

²⁶ Warner, Generals in Gray, 137.

²⁷ Hal Bridges, Lee's Maverick General (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1961), 240, hereinafter cited as Bridges, Lee's Maverick General.

Bentonville. Nicknamed "Old Reliable" by his troops, Hardee was forty-nine years old at this time. He was a Georgian and was a graduate of West Point.²⁸ In 1840, at the age of twenty-four, William Hardee left his regiment and went to France for one year to attend the Royal Cavalry School at Saumur. He studied the most up-to-date cavalry and infantry tactics being introduced into the French system by Algerian veterans. These new methods emphasized elastic formations, self-sufficiency, the use of small detachments, and the importance of rapidity of movement in battle. Just as important, the school at Saumur taught Hardee what a model army officer could and should be.²⁹

Hardee returned to the United States and served in the Mexican War where he was twice brevetted for gallantry. In 1856, he was selected to become the commandant of cadets at West Point by Secretary of War Jefferson Davis. Davis recognized the need to reorganize American light infantry tactics. The result was the publication of the famous Rifle and Light Infantry Tactics.³⁰ Hardee, assisted by an army board, translated the French tactics manual and modified it to meet the demands of the American army organization. Hardee's Tactics had a profound effect on the military establishment by shifting the emphasis in

²⁸ Warner, Generals in Gray, 124.

²⁹ Nathaniel C. Hughes, "William Joseph Hardee, C.S.A., 1861-1865" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1959), 3, hereinafter cited as Hughes, "William Joseph Hardee." This manuscript has been published under the title William Joseph Hardee: Old Reliable.

³⁰ William J. Hardee, Rifle and Light Infantry Tactics: For the Exercise and Maneuvers of Troops When Acting as Light Infantry or Riflemen (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott and Co., 1860), 2 Vols.

American tactics from precision and mass to speed and flexibility.

This manual became the pocket-sized text for the inexperienced volunteer and officer during the Civil War.³¹

In 1860, Hardee resigned his post at West Point. Oliver O. Howard, who ironically would face Hardee in the battle of Bentonville as commander of Sherman's right wing, had "associated closely" with Hardee while he was commandant of West Point. Howard stated that "by 1861 . . . no name was more familiar to the people at large than his. His resignation produced a sensation at West Point. It had an influential effect on the Cadet Corps and acted as a sobering agent for many of the Military Academy officials."³²

William Hardee was commissioned a brigadier general by the Confederate government in June, 1861. He organized a brigade of Arkansas regiments and commanded them until he was summoned to fight under Albert S. Johnston before the battle of Shiloh. General Hardee next commanded a wing of the Army of Tennessee in General Bragg's Kentucky Campaign. He was promoted to lieutenant general in October, 1862. Hardee served gallantly in every battle from Chattanooga to Bentonville. However, by 1865, General Hardee had been transformed into a grim and disillusioned old man. Following the loss of Atlanta, Hardee's perspective on the war had slipped. The study and practice of war had given his life meaning. By this time, however, that institution which

³¹ Hughes, "William Joseph Hardee," 536.

³² Oliver O. Howard, Autobiography of Oliver Otis Howard, Major General United States Army (New York: Baker and Taylor Company, 1907), I, 101, hereinafter cited as Howard, Autobiography.

had been most important to him had been the cause of the collapse of his homeland. General Hardee was later recognized along with Generals Stonewall Jackson and Longstreet, to be among the most outstanding corps commanders in the Confederate service.³³

General Hardee's Corps was divided into two divisions and consisted of a total of 5,400 men at the beginning of the battle of Bentonville.³⁴ Commanding one of these divisions was Major General William B. Taliaferro. A Virginian, Taliaferro, was forty-two years old. He had studied law at Harvard and had fought in the Mexican War. He later served as a member of the House of Delegates in Virginia from 1850 to 1853. He was commander of the Virginia militia at the time of John Brown's raid.³⁵

At the beginning of the Civil War, Taliaferro served as a major general of militia in the Peninsula Campaign.³⁶ He then became a colonel of the Twenty-third Virginia Infantry. In the Shenandoah Valley Campaign, Taliaferro was promoted to brigadier general and fought under General Stonewall Jackson. Taliaferro commanded the Stonewall division despite Jackson's objection during the battle of Second Manassas.³⁷ After this engagement, he was ordered to assist General P. G. T.

³³ Warner, Generals in Gray, 124; Hughes, "William Joseph Hardee, 581.

³⁴ Torrey McLean, Unpublished research study conducted on the Battle of Bentonville for the Historic Sites Section, Department of Cultural Resources, 1978, hereinafter cited as McLean, Bentonville research study.

³⁵ Warner, Generals in Gray, 297.

³⁶ Warner, Generals in Gray, 297.

³⁷ Boatner, The Civil War Dictionary, 826.

Beauregard in the defense of Charleston. The remainder of his war years were spent on various duties in South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. His last duty was to be called up with Hardee's forces to lead a division at Bentonville.³⁸

The commander of the second division in Hardee's Corps at Bentonville was Major General Lafayette McLaws. He was forty-seven years old and a Georgian. McLaws attended West Point where he befriended D. H. Hill and A. P. Stewart, fellow officers at Bentonville. He began his military service in the Mexican War and later entered the Confederate army as a colonel in the Tenth Georgia Infantry.³⁹ McLaws was promoted to brigadier general in September, 1861, and then moved up quickly in rank to major general in May, 1862, for his leadership in the Peninsula Campaign. During this campaign he was a division commander in the First Corps of the Army of Northern Virginia. McLaws also fought at Antietam, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, and took part in the slaughterous "Devils Den" at Gettysburg.⁴⁰ During the Knoxville Campaign, McLaws was relieved by General Longstreet "for lack of confidence" in the unsuccessful assault of Fort Sanders. He was exonerated on these charges by President Davis who refused to order a court martial, and was restored to his command. More controversy ensued between the two generals which led to McLaws being assigned to the district of Georgia with

³⁸ Warner, Generals in Gray, 297.

³⁹ Warner, Generals in Gray, 204.

⁴⁰ Boatner, The Civil War Dictionary, 536.

the responsibility of defending Savannah.⁴¹ When Savannah fell to General Sherman in December, 1864, General McLaws was ordered to serve under General Johnston in North Carolina.

Perhaps the most controversial commander present at the battle of Bentonville was General Braxton Bragg. Bragg, a native of North Carolina, was fifty-five years old. He entered West Point at the age of fifteen and graduated fifth out of a class of fifty in the field of artillery. He fought in the Seminole and Mexican Wars and retired in 1956 to become a Louisiana sugar cane planter.⁴² With the onset of hostilities between the North and South, Bragg was appointed a major general in the Confederate army. He was selected by Jefferson Davis to command the defenses of New Orleans. After the loss of Council, Mississippi, Bragg succeeded General P. G. T. Beauregard as the commander of the Western Theatre of operations. He was promoted to full general in April, 1862. General Bragg assumed command of the Army of Tennessee and invaded Kentucky. Potentially what should have resulted in a victorious campaign for Bragg turned into an embarrassing defeat. Bragg was blamed for the loss of Kentucky by many generals and congressmen.⁴³ Bragg's personal friendship with President Davis helped him to retain his command. Bragg then went on to "snatch defeat out of the jaws of victory" by not following up early success at the battle of Stones River. His next encounter with Union forces at Chickamauga

⁴¹ Warner, Generals in Gray, 204-205.

⁴² Boatner, The Civil War Dictionary, 78.

⁴³ Boatner, The Civil War Dictionary, 78.

temporarily redeemed his image. Generals Bragg and Longstreet were successful in routing the Union army in a very bloody battle, second only to Gettysburg in total casualties. However, Bragg's fortune was short lived. In late 1863, during the battle of Lookout Mountain, Confederate troops under his command were soundly defeated. Bragg was relieved from the command and Joseph E. Johnston replaced him.⁴⁴ Bragg traveled to Richmond where he became military advisor to President Davis in February, 1864. His unpopularity among his peers increased here because he was given preferential treatment above and beyond higher ranking officers.⁴⁵ After General Lee was appointed general-in-chief, Bragg was sent to defend Fort Fisher. His late arrival could have been the cause of the loss of this last bastion of Confederate coastal defense to Union invasion forces in early 1865. At this juncture, Bragg withdrew his army and marched to Smithfield and joined General Johnston.

Major General Robert F. Hoke was in command of North Carolina troops under the direct supervision of General Bragg. A North Carolinian, Hoke was just twenty-seven years old at Bentonville. He had risen through the ranks to become the youngest major general in the Confederate army. Hoke had received extensive battle experience under Lee. General Hoke began his military career by training at the Kentucky Military Academy.⁴⁶ He entered Confederate service as a second

⁴⁴ Boatner, The Civil War Dictionary, 78.

⁴⁵ Warner, Generals in Gray, 31.

⁴⁶ Jon L. Wakelyn, The Biographical Dictionary of the Confederacy (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1977), 233, hereinafter cited as Wakelyn, Biographical Dictionary.

lieutenant of the First North Carolina Volunteers. After fighting in the battle of Big Bethel, Hoke was subsequently promoted to major and lieutenant colonel of the Thirty-third North Carolina and colonel of the Twenty-first North Carolina Volunteers. He was distinguished at all of the battles engaged in by the Army of Northern Virginia from Seven Days to Chancellorsville and was severely wounded in the latter campaign. He was appointed brigadier general in January, 1863.⁴⁷ Upon recovering from his injuries, Hoke was sent to tidewater North Carolina to check Union sentiments with a show of military force. As a result of his brilliant action in capturing Plymouth, North Carolina and its garrison of three thousand Federals, Hoke was promoted to major general in April, 1864.⁴⁸ He then returned to Virginia where he participated in General Beauregard's bottling up General Benjamin F. Butler at Drewry's Bluff and in the repulse of Grant at Cold Harbor. Hoke and his division again returned in early 1865 to North Carolina to defend Fort Fisher.⁴⁹ When it was captured in February, 1865, Hoke's division, under the command of General Bragg, withdrew into central North Carolina to join Johnston at Smithfield. Bentonville would mark the second time Hoke had engaged in battle in the month of March. On the ninth, Bragg's North Carolinians had encountered General Schofield's Twenty-third Corps near Kinston.

⁴⁷ Warner, Generals in Gray, 140.

⁴⁸ Boatner, The Civil War Dictionary, 405.

⁴⁹ Warner, Generals in Gray, 122.

Lieutenant General Wade Hampton from South Carolina was the officer chosen to lead all cavalry in Johnston's attempt to stop Sherman. He figured prominently in delaying the Fourteenth Corps on March 18 on the Goldsboro road so that Johnston's other units could concentrate at Smithfield. Hampton was forty-six years old at the battle of Bentonville.

Hampton had become a well-known personality and reputed to be the largest landowner in the South before the Civil War.⁵⁰ He doubted the economic soundness of slavery. When the outbreak of hostilities occurred, Hampton admitted to the right of the South to withdraw from the Union, but disputed the wisdom of this policy.⁵¹ He reportedly fought from a sense of duty, not from love of combat.⁵² For this reason, Hampton was called the "Patrician Warrior."⁵³ He organized the Hampton Legion and became its colonel. Hampton fully equipped this brigade from his personal funds and took it to Virginia to participate in the battle of First Manassas, where he was wounded. His next conflict involved commanding an infantry brigade in the Peninsula Campaign where he was once again wounded at Seven Pines in early 1862. He was promoted to brigadier general. In July, he assumed command of a brigade of Jeb Stuart's cavalry corps of the Army of Northern Virginia. He remained with Stuart's cavalry until 1864. Hampton was wounded for

⁵⁰ Warner, Generals in Gray, 122.

⁵¹ Boatner, The Civil War Dictionary, 370.

⁵² Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, I, 11.

⁵³ Wiley, Embattled Confederates, 46.

the third time at Gettysburg. He was subsequently promoted to major general in August, 1863. Upon the death of Jeb Stuart at the battle of Yellow Tavern, Hampton succeeded him as corps commander. He then performed brilliantly in keeping Federal cavalry at bay around Richmond and Petersburg until the winter of 1864.⁵⁴ During the battle of Hatcher's Run in 1864, Hampton had one son wounded and one killed under his command.⁵⁵

In January of 1865, Hampton began training his cavalry to fight on foot as horses had become scarce in the Confederate army.⁵⁶ It was during this month that Hampton was instructed by General Lee to take a unit of cavalry to join General Johnston in North Carolina. In February, 1865, Hampton was promoted to lieutenant general. He became one of only three civilians to attain the rank of lieutenant general without former military training in Confederate service.⁵⁷

General Johnston was fortunate in having two very capable cavalry commanders present at Bentonville. Although just twenty-eight years old at the time of the battle, Major General Joe Wheeler had been wounded three times and had had fourteen horses shot out from under him. Thirty-six staff officers had fallen by his side. His exploits were second only to Bedford Forrest.⁵⁸ The nickname given him by his counterparts

⁵⁴ Warner, Generals in Gray, 123.

⁵⁵ Wiley, Embattled Confederates, 46.

⁵⁶ Boatner, The Civil War Dictionary, 371.

⁵⁷ Warner, Generals in Gray, 123.

⁵⁸ Warner, Generals in Gray, 133.

was "Fightin' Joe." A Georgian, he had graduated from West Point in 1859. Wheeler resigned his second lieutenant's commission with the Mounted Rifles when the Civil War began. From April, 1861 to February, 1863, a period of just twenty-one months, he became a Confederate major general placed in command of all cavalry in the Army of Tennessee. He participated in the battles of Shiloh, Murfreesboro, Chattanooga, and was active in the Atlanta Campaign.⁵⁹ His "dogged aggressiveness" and hard-hitting tactics made him a valuable adjunct to Western Confederate defenses.⁶⁰ Wheeler was less effective in stopping Sherman's advance on Savannah. Wheeler's command was much criticized for its lack of discipline where it was said that his troops plundered and pillaged just as much as those of Sherman. Wheeler was overshadowed by Wade Hampton in these early months of 1865.

Major General Matthew G. Butler commanded a cavalry division of 1,064 men under General Hampton during the battle of Bentonville.⁶¹ Butler, a forty-six-year-old South Carolinian, had married into the politically influential family of Governor Francis Pickens of South Carolina. He was commissioned a captain in the Hampton Legion at the onset of hostilities in 1861. He fought at First Manassas and was promoted to a major of South Carolina cavalry during the Peninsula Campaign. The battles of Antietam, Fredericksburg, and Brandy Station followed. Butler lost his right foot in the latter conflict in 1863.

⁵⁹ Warner, Generals in Gray, 333.

⁶⁰ Boatner, The Civil War Dictionary, 910.

⁶¹ McLean, Bentonville Research Study.

In September, 1864, Butler was promoted to major general and joined General Joe Johnston in North Carolina in the winter of 1865.⁶²

General Sherman's veteran Union army, which converged on Bentonville, had participated in what had been perhaps one of the most grueling, arduous series of campaigns any invading force has ever participated in within enemy territory. Since the summer of 1864, Sherman's troops had marched back and forth across the Southland, destroying that which was dearest to the Confederate soldier and his family; his farms and towns. This impressive feat had been accomplished in large part without a line of supplies and without constant guidance from the military hierarchy in Washington, D.C. Sherman had been able to execute his planned march in a fashion which had been unheard of in the first three years of this war. What sort of man could plan a campaign of this magnitude which was strategically far ahead of its times?

Major General William Tecumseh Sherman was forty-five years old at the time of Bentonville. Born in Ohio, he was one of eleven children. Sherman graduated from West Point in 1840 and led an unexceptional military career before the War Between the States. He won a brevet of captain "for meritorious service in California during the war with Mexico."⁶³ At the end of this war, Sherman left the military and went into private business. In 1859, he was appointed superintendent of the Louisiana State Seminary of Learning and Military Academy at

⁶² Boatner, The Civil War Dictionary, 110.

⁶³ Ezra J. Warner, Generals in Blue: Lives of the Union Commanders (Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 442, hereinafter cited as Warner, Generals in Blue.

pineville [now Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge]. Ironically, Braxton Bragg was the State Commissioner of Swamp Lands for Louisiana and Sherman was able to attain his position mainly through Bragg's political influence.⁶⁴ Sherman remained in this position until January, 1861, when he left Louisiana to return to the North.⁶⁵ His next trip into this area would have different intentions!

In May, 1861, Sherman was appointed colonel of the newly authorized Thirteenth Division. At Manassas, Sherman lost more men than any other brigade commander. In August, 1861, Sherman became the seventh highest ranking brigadier general of volunteers. Ironically, he was eleven numbers ahead of Ulysses Grant in rank on the list arranged by the United States War Department.

General Sherman grew to dislike the press and had a volatile temperament which he displayed to inquisitive reporters on many occasions. Outraged, they portrayed Sherman as a visionary, unstable, and mentally deranged.⁶⁶ This feud escalated as time went on and was almost responsible for ending Sherman's military career.⁶⁷

During the battle of Shiloh, Sherman was wounded and had three horses shot out from under him. He was promoted to major general of

⁶⁴ John Liddell, "Liddell's Record of the Civil War," The Southern Bivouac, I (December, 1885), 414, hereinafter cited as Liddell, Record of the Civil War.

⁶⁵ Warner, Generals in Blue, 442.

⁶⁶ Warner, Generals in Blue, 442-443.

⁶⁷ Boatner, The Civil War Dictionary, 751.

volunteers in May, 1862. He participated in one attempt to open the Mississippi River to Union control. He was also present at the siege and capture of Vicksburg. Sherman commanded Union forces during the bloody battle for Missionary Ridge in Tennessee in 1864.⁶⁸ He then received command of all troops in the Western Theatre after General Grant was promoted to the chief command of the United States Army. General Sherman's next series of combat operations constituted the apo-gee of his career. He would inaugurate a theory of "total warfare" unlike any methods used previously during the Civil War to destroy the enemy's homeland.⁶⁹ Because of his brilliant leadership in the capture of Atlanta and his subsequent "March to the Sea," Sherman was promoted to major general in the Regular Army. His next march from Savannah to Bentonville was no less a military feat.⁷⁰ Sherman did not hate the South. He believed his method of warfare would undermine the morale of the South, providing a "defeatist psychology" both on the homefront and the battlefield.⁷¹ It was not a sense of cruelty and barbarism that prompted Sherman but one of determinism to see the war ended by crushing the South.⁷² Sherman was reputed to be only a mediocre field

⁶⁸ Warner, Generals in Blue, 443.

⁶⁹ Warner, Generals in Blue, 443.

⁷⁰ Warner, Generals in Blue, 443; Sherman, Memoirs, II, 221.

⁷¹ Frank L. Owsley, "Defeatism in the Confederacy," The North Carolina Historical Review, III (July, 1926), 446-448.

⁷² John G. Barrett, "Sherman and Total War," North Carolina Historical Review, XXXVII (July, 1960), 368, hereinafter cited as Barrett, "Total War."

tactician. He would sacrifice any number of troops to achieve victory. To Sherman, war was cruel and you could not refine it.⁷³

General Henry W. Slocum commanded the left wing of Sherman's army at Bentonville.⁷⁴ This wing, which consisted of 26,021 men, was called the Army of Georgia and was composed of the Fourteenth and Twentieth Corps. Slocum was thirty-eight years old in 1865. A West Point graduate, he had participated in the Seminole War and later was on garrison duty in Charleston Harbor.⁷⁵ Prior to the Civil War, Slocum had become an instructor of artillery in the New York State Militia. When hostilities commenced, he was appointed a colonel of the Twenty-seventh New York Volunteers. At First Manassas he was wounded. Soon thereafter he became a division commander, and in August, 1861, Slocum was promoted to brigadier general. A year later, he was appointed major general. During this period, Major General Slocum was the second youngest officer of his rank in the Union army. He participated in the Maryland Campaign and was appointed to lead the Twelfth Corps. During the battle of Chancellorville, Slocum's Corps lost 2,755 men from a total of six brigades engaged. He also commanded troops in the battles of Chickamauga and Gettysburg. After the battle of Chattanooga, Slocum submitted his resignation because he was doubtful of General Joseph Hooker's ability to command. Under a compromise plan adopted to please all parties and prevent any resignations, the Eleventh and Twelfth Corps was consolidated

⁷³ Barrett, "Total War," 381.

⁷⁴ McLean, Bentonville Research Study.

⁷⁵ Warner, Generals in Blue, 451.

into the Twentieth Corps, with Hooker as the commander. During the campaign of Atlanta in 1864, Slocum was given the command of the Twentieth Corps. From the time of the capture of Atlanta to the battle of Bentonville, Major General Slocum commanded the left wing of Sherman's army.

Major General Jefferson C. Davis was in command of the Fourteenth Corps attached to Slocum's left wing at Bentonville. A native of Indiana, Davis was thirty-seven years old, the same age as General Slocum. At the age of eighteen, Davis had served in the Mexican War. When hostilities commenced in 1861, he was present during the Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter.⁷⁷ Davis was then appointed a colonel of the Twenty-second Indiana Volunteers in August, 1861. Four months later, Colonel Davis was promoted to brigadier general. He participated in the battle of Pea Ridge in March, 1862, and in the siege of Corinth.

On September 29, 1861, General Davis provoked a quarrel with his ex-commanding officer, General Wilburn Nelson, and shot him down in Louisville, Kentucky. One impartial witness said the act was murder, but with the assistance of Governor Morton of Indiana, he was restored to duty. He went on to distinguish himself at the battles of Murfreesboro, Chickamauga, and Atlanta. Davis was placed in command of the Fourteenth Corps during Sherman's "March to the Sea."⁷⁸ Although

⁷⁷ Warner, Generals in Blue, 115.

⁷⁸ Warner, Generals in Blue, 116.

recommended for promotion to major general by William Rosecrans and Grant, Davis would never attain this promotion.⁷⁹

Brigadier General William P. Carlin was in command of the First Division of the Fourteenth Corps during the battle of Bentonville. Troop strength was approximately 3,695 men. A native of Illinois, Carlin was thirty-five years old in 1835. Before the war he graduated from West Point and was stationed in the West on garrison duty. While there he participated in William S. Harney's expedition against the Cheyenne in 1857. He was also present in Albert Sidney Johnston's celebrated Mormon Expedition in 1858.⁸⁰ Carlin had attained the rank of captain and when the Civil War began he was commissioned a colonel of the Thirty-eighth Illinois Infantry. At the battle of Perryville in October, 1862, he subsequently distinguished himself and was promoted to brigadier general of volunteers. He then participated in the battles of Stone's River, Chickamauga, and Chattanooga. In the Atlanta campaign, General Carlin was cited for gallantry. He became a division commander at Jonesboro, where he would remain until the conflict at Bentonville.⁸¹

The Second Division of the Fourteenth Corps was commanded by Brigadier General James D. Morgan. General Morgan, a Bostonian, began his military career by serving in the Mexican War. Upon the outbreak of hostilities in 1861, Morgan was appointed lieutenant colonel of the

⁷⁹ Boatner, The Civil War Dictionary, 226.

⁸⁰ Warner, Generals in Blue, 69.

⁸¹ Warner, Generals in Blue, 70.

Tenth Illinois Volunteers and was promoted to colonel on May 20, 1861. Morgan then directed a brigade in the battle for Island Number Ten and the seige of Corinth. The rank of brigadier general was achieved by July, 1862. Morgan advanced from a brigade commander during the Atlanta campaign to division commander in the Carolina campaign.⁸² It was elements of Morgan's division that encountered Wade Hampton's cavalry on March 18, on the road leading to Goldsboro.

The Twentieth Corps, marching in formation approximately nine miles behind the Fourteenth Corps, was commanded by Brigadier General Alpheus S. Williams. Nicknamed "Old Pap" by his troops,⁸³ Williams wore a beard more luxuriant than was customary even in those days.⁸⁴ Fifty-four years old at the time of Bentonville, General Williams commanded 12,900 men. He was a Yale graduate and had fought in the Mexican War. In August, 1861, he was commissioned a brigadier general. He participated in the Shenandoah Valley Campaign of 1862 and in the battle of Cedar Mountain. William's next engagement was Second Manassas. For a short while thereafter, he commanded the Twelfth Corps because its commander had been killed in action.⁸⁵ Williams fought with distinction at Gettysburg and Chancellorsville. When the Eleventh and Twelfth Corps were consolidated into the Twentieth Corps, he received command of a division in this corps, which was a part of the Army of

⁸²Warner, Generals in Blue, 335.

⁸³Boatner, The Civil War Dictionary, 927.

⁸⁴Boatner, The Civil War Dictionary, 927.

⁸⁵Warner, Generals in Blue, 560.

the Cumberland. He retained this command throughout the Atlanta Campaign and through the battle of Bentonville. Brigadier General Williams was always superseded in rank by Henry Slocum and Joseph Mower.⁸⁶

Major General Oliver Otis Howard commanded the Army of Tennessee, which formed the right wing of Sherman's army. The number of troops in his command was approximately 26,618 men and was composed of the Fifteenth and Seventeenth Corps. A native of Maine, Howard was thirty-four at Bentonville. A graduate of West Point, he began the Civil War as a first lieutenant of ordnance. In May, 1861, Howard was elected colonel of the Third Maine Volunteers. He commanded a brigade at First Manassas. In this battle his command was driven from the field in disorder. Ironically, Howard was rewarded with a commission of brigadier general in September, 1861.⁸⁷ During the battle of Seven Pines, he lost his right arm. Upon recovery, Howard returned to service and fought in the battles of Second Manassas, Sharpsburg, and Fredericksburg. He was subsequently promoted to major general in November, 1862. At the battle of Chancellorsville, General Howard led the Eleventh Corps which was routed by Stonewall Jackson. During the battle of Gettysburg, he displayed a conspicuous lack of decision but was voted the thanks of Congress.⁸⁸ After the battle of Chattanooga in November, 1863, Howard was sent to command the Fourth Corps in the Atlanta Campaign. General Howard's career constitutes one of the greatest paradoxes in American

⁸⁶ Warner, Generals in Blue, 560.

⁸⁷ Warner, Generals in Blue, 237.

⁸⁸ Warner, Generals in Blue, 238.

military history. No officer entrusted with the field direction of troops has ever equaled Howard's record for surviving so many tactical errors of judgment and disregard of orders, to later emerge with increased rank.⁸⁹ After the death of James B. McPherson, General Sherman assigned Howard to command the Army of Tennessee in the campaign of the Carolinas.

Major General John A. "Blackjack" Logan commanded the Fifteenth Corps at Bentonville. He was forty-nine years old in 1865 and was nicknamed "Blackjack" because of his black eyes and hair and his swarthy complexion. Many believed General Logan to be the Union's premier civilian combat general.⁹⁰ He had begun his military career in the Mexican War but left the service afterwards to serve in the Illinois legislature. When hostilities began during the Civil War, Logan fought as a volunteer in a Michigan regiment. He then returned to Illinois and formed the Thirty-first Illinois Volunteers and was commissioned a colonel in September 1861. He became an instant success as a field commander in the Western armies. Logan fought in the battle of Fort Donelson where he was wounded. He was then promoted to brigadier general in March, 1862. During the battle of Corinth, Logan commanded a division of General Grant's Army of Tennessee. A promotion soon followed in the form of a major generalship, effective November, 1863.⁹¹ In December, 1863, Major General Logan succeeded James McPherson as

⁸⁹ Warner, Generals in Blue, 237.

⁹⁰ Warner, Generals in Blue, 281.

⁹¹ Warner, Generals in Blue, 282.

the commander of the Army of Tennessee. He was relieved by President Lincoln five days after he had taken command, on General Sherman's recommendation. Sherman believed Logan was a first-rate combat soldier but he lacked the ability to comprehend the logistical preparation of an army for battle.⁹² This setback, however disappointing, did not prevent Logan's gallantry in battle. He was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor because of his excellence while leading the Seventeenth Corps at Vicksburg. He was then transferred to the Fifteenth Corps, which he commanded from the Atlanta Campaign to the battle of Bentonville.⁹³ It is readily apparent that Sherman's contempt for Logan as a "political general" could be a title used only away from the battlefield.

Major General Francis P. Blair led the Seventeenth Corps under Howard's right wing. A native of Kentucky, he was forty-four years old in 1865. Blair's family was prominent politically. His father had been an advisor to Andrew Jackson and his brother was President Lincoln's first postmaster general. Francis Blair became attorney general of the New Mexico Territory; years later he returned to St. Louis to fight the extension of slavery, even though he owned slaves himself.⁹⁴ In 1848, he founded the Free Soil Party in Missouri and was instrumental in saving this state and Kentucky as a free state. Blair

⁹²Boatner, The Civil War Dictionary, 486-487.

⁹³Warner, Generals in Blue, 283.

⁹⁴Warner, Generals in Blue, 36.

accomplished this by directing, without authority, the capture of the St. Louis arsenal.⁹⁵ By August, 1862, Blair had become a brigadier general of volunteers and was soon thereafter promoted to major general. He was a brigade commander in the Yazoo Expedition during the Vicksburg Campaign. Blair became an intimate friend of General Sherman and in the Georgia Campaign he was made commander of the Seventeenth Corps.

Major General Joseph A. Mower was in command of the First Division of the Seventeenth Corps at Bentonville. This division numbered 3,780 men. Mower, born in Vermont, saw his first military duty during the Mexican War. During the Civil War, Mower built a magnificent record as a regimental, brigade, division, and corps commander. In May, 1862, he became a colonel of the Eleventh Missouri [Union] Infantry. By March, 1863, Mower had been promoted to major general. He was brevetted for gallantry up through all of the grades including major general. During the battle of Corinth, Mower was wounded, captured, and escaped, only to be recaptured. After he was exchanged, Mower directed a brigade of William Sherman's Fifteenth Corps in the Vicksburg Campaign. General Mower was transferred to the Seventeenth Corps in November, 1864, to lead the First Division, but was still attached to Sherman's Army of Tennessee. Sherman stated that Mower was "the boldest young soldier we have."⁹⁶

Brigadier General Judson Kilpatrick commanded Sherman's cavalry. He was nicknamed "Kil-Cavalry" by his troops because of the ill-kept

⁹⁵ Boatner, The Civil War Dictionary, 67.

⁹⁶ Warner, Generals in Blue, 339.

condition of his horses.⁹⁷ Kilpatrick's cavalry made up the Third division and numbered 4,355 men. Just twenty-nine years old at Bentonville, Kilpatrick had avoided capture in a surprise attack by Wade Hampton's cavalry just a week before, by running away from his headquarters at dawn in his underwear.⁹⁸

Kilpatrick graduated from West Point in artillery and cavalry in 1861. He was commissioned a captain of the Fifth New York Volunteers shortly after the firing on Fort Sumter. During the battle of Big Bethel in June, 1861, Kilpatrick became the first Regular Army officer to be wounded. In September, 1861, he was promoted to lieutenant colonel of the Second New York Cavalry. Kilpatrick was sent to the Washington defense until January, 1862. As an aide-de-camp, he was subsequently transferred to Kansas to serve as chief of artillery in General John Lane's Texas Expedition. This project was abandoned in March, 1862, and Kilpatrick then returned to his regiment quartered in Arlington, Virginia. Later he took part in the skirmishes at Brandy Station, Freeman's Ford, and Haymarket. In December, 1862, he was promoted to colonel of the Second New York Cavalry.⁹⁹ He commanded the First and Third Cavalry Corps in George Stoneman's raid toward Richmond in early 1863. Kilpatrick was then promoted to brigadier general of the United States Volunteers in June, 1863. At this point the general took over command

⁹⁷ Warner, Generals in Blue, 266.

⁹⁸ Posey Hamilton, "The Effort to Capture Kilpatrick," Confederate Veteran, XXIX (September, 1921), 329.

⁹⁹ Boatner, The Civil War Dictionary, 459.

of the Third Division of the Army of the Potomac and fought at Gettysburg. In the winter of 1864, he devised and took part in the celebrated Kilpatrick-Dahlgren Raid on Richmond to attempt to free Union prisoners. The raid failed and he was transferred to the Western Theatre at the request of General Sherman, who is alleged to have said, "I know Kilpatrick is a hell of a damned fool, but I want just that sort of man to command my cavalry on this expedition."¹⁰⁰ Kilpatrick joined the Army of the Cumberland where he was assigned to command the Third Division. He took part in the Atlanta Campaign and was severely wounded at Resaca. Upon his recovery he participated in several heavy skirmishes against his West Point schoolmate, Joe Wheeler.¹⁰¹ Judson Kilpatrick was described as a man "whose notorious immoralities and rapacity set so demoralizing an example to his troops that the best disciplinarians among his subordinates could only mitigate its influence."¹⁰² However, in battle he was said to display "a dare-devil recklessness that dismayed his opponents and imparted his own daring to his men."¹⁰³

It is readily evident that all of these officers, Union and Confederate, were skilled in the art of war. These generals, who engaged each other on the battlefield at Bentonville were the fortunate ones. Many of their comrades had fallen in the four bloody years which had

¹⁰⁰ Boatner, The Civil War Dictionary, 495.

¹⁰¹ Warner, Generals in Blue, 266.

¹⁰² Boatner, The Civil War Dictionary, 460.

¹⁰³ Boatner, The Civil War Dictionary, 460.

preceded 1865. The years of training at West Point and other military institutions before the Civil War had created one of the finest assemblages of officers the world had known. It was tragic that these men were forced to use that talent to slaughter one another.

FIRST DAY OF BATTLE: MARCH 19

Sunday morning, March 19, began as a day in which men reveled after winter had held its grip on the land for many months. The first days of spring had arrived as was evidenced by the blooming apple and peach trees. Colonel McClurg wrote, "The early spring morning was soft and balmy, and the shrubbery and some trees were covered with such delicate verdure. . . . Fruit trees were in full bloom, around Mr. Underhill's farmhouse and in other places by the roads."¹ This day seemed to bring new promise to the past days of steady rains and muddy roads. A brigade band of the Union Fourteenth Corps struck up "the familiar strains of Old Hundred . . . hidden in the little valley of Mill Creek below. . . . Never before, perhaps had the sweet notes of the grand old hymn sounded sweeter . . . to weary soldiers As they stopped to listen, they brought thoughts of quiet homes and of country churches and friends far away."² Sherman's ragged troops had nearly reached their objective. A march of two days at best would take them to Goldsboro. Their trek of over four hundred miles was almost at an end. There would be mail waiting for them and the friendly faces of the members of Schofield's army would be a welcome sight. One staff officer recorded these thoughts: "It is a long campaign we have had, marching

¹Alexander C. McClurg, "The Last Chance of the Confederacy," The Atlantic Monthly (September, 1882), L, 389, hereinafter cited as McClurg, "Last Chance."

²McClurg, "Last Chance," 389.

for sixty days over four hundred miles of an enemy's country, and repose would be welcome."³ Supplies were running very low. "The men had endured cold and wet, hunger and fatigue; they were poorly supplied with clothing. . . . Many of them [were] . . . almost naked and entirely barefooted."⁴ Furthermore, as one soldier recalled, "the pride and pomp of circumstance of glorious war had disappeared. . . ."⁵ It was not unusual to see a Confederate coat and hat worn here and there on a Federal back.⁶

Reveille had been sounded that morning about five o'clock. When the strains of "Old Hundred" had ceased, and the men had finished their accustomed breakfast of coffee and hardtack, varied here and there with a piece of cold chicken or ham, or a baked sweet potato, foraged from the country, the regiments of the First Division--General William P. Carlin's--filed out on the road and began the advance. This was about seven o'clock.⁷

Two groups of ragged wall tents had been pitched on a sloping hill overlooking the encamped Fourteenth Corps, situated at the cross-roads of the Clinton-Goldsboro Road. These made up the headquarters of General Slocum, who had been host to General Sherman the night before. The other group of tents constituted the headquarters of General

³Nichols, Great March, 261.

⁴Philo B. Buckingham to Capt. H. G. H. Tarr, March 28, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 835.

⁵McClurg, "Last Chance," 389-390.

⁶McClurg, "Last Chance," 390.

⁷McClurg, "Last Chance," 391.

Jefferson C. Davis, commander of the Fourteenth Corps.⁸ General Sherman had decided the night before to join General Oliver Howard's right wing that morning, ". . . so as to be nearer to Generals Schofield and Terry, known to be approaching Goldsboro."⁹ He believed that the danger from a Confederate attack at this point in his march was minimal. "All signs induced me to believe that the enemy would make no further opposition to our progress, and would not attempt to strike us in flank while in motion."¹⁰ General Howard's wing, which left camp at approximately the same time as the Fourteenth Corps, was strung out on the new road to Goldsboro. His troops camped that night at Lee's Store, just two miles south of Slocum's position.¹¹

The two divisions of the Fourteenth Corps, from which Sherman departed, numbered just over 8,000 men. Two divisions of the Twentieth Corps, which constituted the other part of the left wing, had encamped the night before approximately eight miles in the rear of the Fourteenth Corps. The expanse of road separating the two had become virtually impassable because of mud. Two remaining divisions of these corps were escorting and guarding the long line of supply trains some miles further

⁸ Charles E. Slocum, Life and Services of Major-General Henry Warner Slocum, Officer of the United States Army (Toledo: Slocum Publishing Co., 1913), 274, hereinafter cited as Slocum, Life of Slocum.

⁹ Sherman, Memoirs, II, 363.

¹⁰ William Sherman to General H. W. Halleck, May 9, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 25.

¹¹ McClurg, "Last Chance," 390; William T. Sherman, Official Account of His Great March Through Georgia and the Carolinas (New York: Bunce and Huntington, Publishers, 1865), 103, hereinafter cited as Sherman, Official Account.

to the south and rear. The Twentieth Corps also numbered about eight thousand men.¹² Sherman's entire army numbered between fifty-seven and fifty-eight thousand troops.¹³

General Sherman decided not to leave the Fourteenth Corps until the leading division had begun its march east. A staff member gives a description of Sherman's departure:

. . . at perhaps half past seven o'clock he and General Slocum, with Jefferson C. Davis, commanding the Fourteenth Army Corps, sat together upon their horses, at the crossroads, listening to the signs of opposition which already came up from the front. Something impressed the soldierly instinct of General Davis with the belief that he was likely to encounter more than the usual cavalry opposition, and he said as much to General Sherman. The latter, after listening attentively a moment or two, replied, in his usual brisk, nervous, and positive way, 'No Jeff, there is nothing there but Dibrell's Cavalry. Brush them out of the way. Good morning. I'll meet you tomorrow morning at Coxe's Bridge' . . . away he rode with his slender staff, to join Howard and the right wing.¹⁴

Oblivious to what fate awaited General Slocum and his left wing, Sherman allowed this wing to fall directly into the trap set by General Johnston's army. It is true that Sherman's assessment of the musket fire he had heard was Dibrell's cavalry skirmishing three miles ahead on the Goldsboro road; however, Johnston's entire army was entrenched behind it and was waiting to smash Slocum's Fourteenth Corps. Sherman, a master of strategy, had previously admitted that he believed General Johnston would attempt to prevent his army from reaching Goldsboro. the skirmish which had taken place on the afternoon of the 18th between

¹² McClurg, "Last Chance," 390.

¹³ McClurg, "Last Chance," 390; McLean, Bentonville Research Study.

¹⁴ McClurg, "Last Chance," 391.

Wade Hampton's cavalry and elements of the Fourteenth Corps should have been a strong sign of impending danger. Apparently, Sherman believed what turned out to be faulty reconnaissance on the part of General Judson Kilpatrick, his cavalry commander. Kilpatrick reported that Hardee's troops were retreating northward toward Smithfield and Joe Johnston was collecting an army in the vicinity of Raleigh.¹⁵ This observation was in fact wrong. Hardee was marching south with all haste on March 18, away from Smithfield to join General Johnston at Bentonville. Furthermore, another incident had taken place in the early afternoon of the same day which lent even more support to an impending conflict. At approximately twelve noon, the First Division of the Fourteenth Corps arrived on a farm belonging to a man named Cox. General Sherman, as before mentioned, was still riding with this wing. He decided this particular farm would be an appropriate spot to have lunch, rest the horses, and converse with General Slocum and his corps commanders. While these officers dismounted and gathered in the front yard, General Carlin, commander of the First Division, walked up on the veranda of the house and took a seat next to Mr. Cox.¹⁶ Carlin immediately sensed a feeling of unaccountable distress in not only this man, but his wife and children as well. General Carlin described the

¹⁵W. T. Sherman to Major-General Howard, March 18, 1865, Official Records Army, Series I, XLVII, Part II, 886.

¹⁶William P. Carlin, "The Battle of Bentonville," Sketches of War History of 1861-1865. Papers Read before the Ohio Commandery of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke and Co., 6 vols., 1888-1908), III, 233, hereinafter cited as Carlin, "Bentonville."

unusual scene in the following way:

The children were crying. Mr. and Mrs. Cox seemed to be weeping, as their eyes were still red. I could not see any reason why this family should manifest such marked signs of trouble merely because Sherman's army was present. . . . At first I supposed he feared our troops, but tried to reassure him on that point. It occurred to me that the family were [sic] hungry and feared starvation. . . . I told them I would leave some subsistence stores for his family. He replied excitedly to this offer . . . 'oh, that won't save us.' His manner throughout and his incoherent remarks showed that he expected some great calamity to befall him and his in a very short time. I became convinced that he wished me to understand that a battle was to be fought on or near his farm, and that this would necessarily endanger his property.¹⁷

This behavior, combined with his earlier surveillance of enemy scouts along the line of march, led General Carlin to state his convictions to General Davis. After they had talked, these two commanders allayed their thoughts to Sherman and Slocum. General Sherman's immediate reply was, "Oh, no; they won't fight us this side of Smithfield or Raleigh."¹⁸ Carlin was very disappointed when he heard Sherman make this remark and felt that his inability to grasp the obvious might prove disastrous to the Union cause.¹⁹ The Federal columns had been molested by Confederate cavalry units since the beginning of the march in Savannah and apparently Sherman did not see much cause for alarm of the campaign.

The anxiety exhibited by the Cox family exemplified the grave reservations which people felt as military units filled the Bentonville area. The people feared that the thousands of soldiers in blue and gray converging on the area would bring disaster. Rumors had circulated

¹⁷ Carlin, "Bentonville," 234.

¹⁸ Carlin, "Bentonville," 235.

¹⁹ Carlin, "Bentonville," 235.

that General Johnston had gathered an army and intended to punish Sherman for the outrages committed upon North Carolina's neighbors to the south. This region was not filled with great plantations and large numbers of slaves as one Union soldier testified when marching through Johnston County: "The farmers here have [sic] not many negroes."²⁰ For the most part, these were yeomen farmers who lived a hand-to-mouth existence and depended on a good crop every year to survive. Many of the fields had been cultivated for spring planting by mid-March. The primary crop was Indian corn, which the families used for flour, selling the remainder to provide hard cash. Sweet potatoes, peas, beans, rye, oats, and Irish potatoes were raised in varying amounts for local use and for sale.²¹ Mules provided the only means by which to plow and harvest these staples and the people were in great fear of losing their livestock to the pillaging armies.

There was one general store in the Bentonville area. It filled the needs which farmers were not able to fill themselves. Produce and dairy products were brought there for barter. The main export industry was the production of naval stores from the pine forests in the area. The process was tedious but profitable. The trees were slashed and the resin was worked into tar, pitch, and turpentine. Men in the

²⁰ A Committee (ed.), Reminiscences of the Civil War, From Diaries of the Members of the One Hundred and Third Illinois Volunteer Infantry (Chicago: J. F. Leaming and Co., 1905), 199, hereinafter cited as Diary, One Hundred and Third Illinois.

²¹ Raleigh Times (Raleigh), December 23, 1961, hereinafter cited as Raleigh Times.

community known as coopers made the barrels which were used to store the finished products. These were loaded on boats or barges and floated down Mill Creek, which ran into the Neuse River, where the trip ended at New Bern.²² There was also a carriage shop operated in Bentonville by one John Hood, which employed many people in the town.²³

In an account published after the war, Mrs. Dora Kirkman, daughter of John Hood, gave an eye-witness account of those tumultuous days. She was just ten years old at the time:

It was the first days of spring that the menacing clouds began to darken the horizon of the village and the lives of the people were filled with apprehension and a foreboding of trying times to come. One day was peace and quiet and happiness and the eve of the next was war and confusion and bold bloodshed. Long before the appearance of soldiers the villagers were seeking places to conceal their treasures. Silver, china-ware . . . [and] money were buried. Unique places to hide them were found for food and other household supplies. My father, wishing to save a large supply of meat, dropped it between the ceiling and weatherboarding of his house. I remember that my mother was very much afraid that the grease from the meat would run through the weather boarding. Fearing that the negroes might be persuaded to betray the whereabouts of their hidden possessions, the whites tactfully suggested that the negroes bury their own valuables in the same places.²⁴

Another young girl named Betty Taylor also gave a vivid account of how her family was affected by the arrival of Union troops in the Bentonville area:²⁵

It had been a hard year. . . . Her grandfather died, there had been a drought, and then her father had gone away to fight in the Confederate Army. . . . Then word came by a knock on the door that Lieutenant Carey Taylor was missing [her father], thought to be killed in a recent battle. After hearing that his father was dead, Tom, the oldest boy, offered

²²Raleigh Times, December 23, 1961.

²³Smithfield Herald, September 13, 1927.

²⁴Smithfield Herald, September 13, 1927.

²⁵Smithfield Herald, September 13, 1927.

his services. . . . Thus Betty Winnifred, the oldest child . . . was on her way home from a day's work in the cornfield on the evening of March 18 when her older brother Tom came running down the lane to warn her . . . saying excitedly, "Betty you've got to get Mother and the children out of here. Sherman and his men are marching this way. There'll surely be a battle at dawn when he meets Johnston's men. Tomorrow is Sunday and a Sunday battle never fails to be bloody. Now get a few clothes and a little food and try to go to Grandmother Taylor's. . . . Hide the horses in the woods. . . ." A strange procession . . . started out on a nine mile walk that night . . . a mother, four children, and the cow, "Juicy Fruit. . . ."²⁶

After running into many obstacles including a Union column marching on the road, they were finally able to reach their destination around 4:30 Sunday morning. Shortly after their safe arrival, they heard the roar of cannon back toward Bentonville.²⁷

These eyewitness accounts on the eve of the battle of Bentonville vividly described the peril these civilians found themselves in. Throughout the war this area had been spared the ravages of war to a great extent. These unwilling participants now shared the fate that innocent people had felt in South Carolina and Georgia in the preceding months.

General Hampton rose very early on March 19, and at daybreak moved his cavalry forward until he reached the scene of the skirmish of the previous evening. His instructions from General Johnston were to post a picket line within a mile of the advance units of the Union Fourteenth Corps and prevent their forward progress down the Goldsboro road. A slow withdrawal would continue until the Confederate infantry divisions could deploy into their battlelines and secure their positions with

²⁶ Smithfield Herald, March 23, 1951.

²⁷ Smithfield Herald, March 23, 1951.

entrenchments. This delaying action was being put into effect primarily to allow Hardee's badly needed reinforcements to arrive on the battlefield.

While Hampton carried out his part of the plan, the remainder of Johnston's available troops marched down the west fork of the road leading from Bentonville. The going proved rough, "as there was but one narrow road through the thicket, the deployment of troops consumed a weary time."²⁸ The placement of each unit in battle formation had been planned the night before. General Hoke's North Carolinians were the first troops to reach their assigned position. His division "formed with its center on the road, its line at right angles to it, on the eastern edge of the plantation, and its left extending some four hundred yards into the thicket to the south."²⁹ Hoke positioned two brigades on the front line, south of the Goldsboro Road. This meant that Johnson Hagood's Brigade was situated on the left of the division and A. H. Colquitt's Brigade was stationed to the right of Hagood. The second line of defense consisted of the brigades of Thomas Clingman and W. W. Kirkland.³⁰ The North Carolina Junior Reserves, were extending the front line further on the right of Colquitt's Brigade. They supported a battery of Joseph Starr's battalion of light artillery and Atkins'

²⁸ Johnston, Narrative of Military Operations, 386.

²⁹ Johnston, Narrative of Military Operations, 386; Clark, Histories of the North Carolina Regiments, IV, 351.

³⁰ Johnson Hagood, Memoirs of the War of Secession (Columbia: The State Company, 1910), 358, hereinafter cited as Hagood, Memoirs.

battery, commanded by George B. Atkins of Fayetteville.³¹ This artillery was situated directly across the field from the Cole House. The Junior Reserves lined up across the Goldsboro road. General Bragg was in command of this sector which consisted of the entire left flank of the Confederate army. The total number of infantry consisted of 4,775 effectives and the number of artillerymen was 782, which made a combined total of 5,600 troops.³²

Units of the Army of Tennessee were situated about four hundred yards to the northwest of, and at an obtuse angle to, Bragg's line. Stewart's Corps was placed on the left with a one-brigade front; Lee's Corps was deployed in the center, and was made up of the brigades of Deas, Palmer, Stovall and Jackson, respectively from left to right. These troops were placed on the front line. General Cheatham's Corps was positioned to the right of Lee's Corps and was made up of Govan's and Smith's brigades.³³ However, this corps was not at full strength because three fourths of Cheatham's command remained stranded at the railroad yard at Salisbury, waiting for available rolling stock to bring them to Smithfield.³⁴ Positioned approximately three hundred yards

³¹Clark, Histories of the North Carolina Regiments, IV, 56; Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 1057-1058.

³²J. E. Johnston to R. E. Lee, March 27, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 1057-1058.

³³Clark, Histories of the North Carolina Regiments, IV, 56; Erik France, "The Battle of Bentonville," unpublished study in the possession of Erik France, Carrboro, March 19, 1, hereinafter cited as France, Battle of Bentonville Study.

³⁴Price, "Railroads," 111, 115-116; Black, Railroads, 274-278.

behind the front line was the second line.³⁵ Brigadier General W. S. Featherstone's brigade supported the front of Stewart's Corps. Three brigades were positioned in support of Lee's Corps. These consisted of Baker's, Pettus', and Manigault's troops.³⁶ The Army of Tennessee extended far to the right and generally conformed to the edge of the open field north of the Cole House.³⁷ The total effective troop strength of this army on the morning of the 19th was approximately 4,500 men.³⁸ Thus, the center of Johnston's formation was not on the Goldsboro road but at the corner of the plantation, a quarter of a mile north.³⁹

General Hardee had awakened his troops very early near the Snead House and had been on the road by 4 A.M. on the 19th. After marching throughout the early hours of the morning, his exhausted army arrived at the town of Bentonville at 9 o'clock A.M. They found the road blocked by Confederate General A. P. Stewart's troops.⁴⁰ Therefore, Hardee's units "moved across Mill Creek to Bentonville . . . [and the] command rested about the church at Bentonville, waiting for Stewart's Corps to get into position. . . ."⁴¹ General Johnston's original plans

³⁵ France, *Battle of Bentonville Study*, March 19, 1.

³⁶ France, *Battle of Bentonville Study*, March 19, 1.

³⁷ Johnston, *Narrative of Military Operations*, 386.

³⁸ J. E. Johnston to R. E. Lee, March 27, 1868, *Official Records (Army)*, Series I, XLVII, Part I, 1057-1058.

³⁹ Barrett, *Sherman's March*, 165.

⁴⁰ Hughes, "William Joseph Hardee," 554.

⁴¹ McLaws' Order Book, March 19 entry.

had called for Hardee's troops to be placed in the gap between Stewart's and Bragg's Corps. However, because of his late arrival on the battlefield, two batteries of horse artillery under the command of Captains Halsey and Earle were placed in the opening to prevent a break in the line. The former battery of artillery had constituted a part of General Hampton's Legion which had been formed at the beginning of the war. This artillery had been vital to his command throughout his campaigns in Virginia.⁴² Hampton's two batteries consisted of eight guns. These batteries comprised the center of the Confederate defense. A unit under the command of Major General Walthall, numbering approximately two hundred, was placed by General Stewart to protect the artillery from being overrun.⁴³

The Confederate troops on the north side of the Goldsboro road faced large open fields. Hoke's troops on the south side were entrenched in thickets which greatly limited their line of vision.⁴⁴ Upon completion of deployment onto the battlefield, the Confederate formation resembled the shape of a sickle. General Bragg's left flank formed the handle and General Stewart's and Hardee's troops formed the cutting edge.

⁴²Hampton, "Bentonville," 703; Ellison Capers, Confederate Military History, edited by General Clement E. Evans (Atlanta: Confederate Publishing Co., 12 volumes, 1899), V, 370, hereinafter cited as Capers, Confederate Military History.

⁴³E. C. Walthall to Maj. R. W. Millsaps, April 8, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 1101; H. G. Bunn to Capt. E. D. Clark, March 28, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 1104-1105.

⁴⁴J. E. Johnston to General R. E. Lee, March 27, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 1056.

Johnston's battle plan was not a complicated one. As the Union Fourteenth Corps advanced east down the Goldsboro road toward the Confederate lines, units of Hampton's cavalry under Dibrell would withdraw behind Bragg's lines. General Bragg would then hold the Federals in his front while General Stewart and the Army of Tennessee would drive down and crush their center and left flank, hopefully resulting in a complete rout. As the troops advanced, beginning with the right flank, "General Bragg's troops were to join in the movement successively from right to left."⁴⁵ The fact that Hardee's troops had not yet deployed into position caused great problems. Johnston had only 10,000 infantry with no reserves.⁴⁶

The brigade of North Carolina Junior Reserves was the most unique organization of the Confederate or Union army to march onto the battlefield that day. Made up completely of boys between seventeen and eighteen years of age, this unit had been affectionately named the "Seed Corn of the Confederacy" by Governor Zebulon Vance.⁴⁷ They were made up of thirty-five companies [three regiments and a battalion of five companies] and had a total strength of 2,887 teenagers.⁴⁸ The Confederate Congress had created the Junior Reserves in early 1864. In May of that year the "Juniors" were called up for duty and were formed into

⁴⁵ J. E. Johnston to General R. E. Lee, March 27, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 1056.

⁴⁶ France, Battle of Bentonville Study, March 19, 2.

⁴⁷ Frederick A. Olds, "The Last Big Battle," Confederate Veteran, XXXVII (February, 1929), 51, hereinafter cited as Olds, "Last Battle."

⁴⁸ Smithfield Herald, March 16, 1955.

eight battalions.⁴⁹ They subsequently went into instruction camps at Raleigh, Goldsboro, Wilmington, Morganton, and Asheville. Upon completion of training, these boys formed the Seventieth, Seventy-first, and Seventy-second Regiments of the North Carolina State Troops.⁵⁰

Colonel J. H. Nethercutt of the Sixty-sixth North Carolina commanded the Junior Reserve Brigade, composed of the above regiments and Millard's Battalion. He had just recently been assigned to this command on March 15, just three days prior to the battle of Bentonville. He was described as ". . . a plain, blunt man, but every inch a soldier."⁵¹ Nethercutt assigned Lieutenant William Calder as assistant adjutant general and Lieutenant E. S. Martin as ordnance officer, both attached to the First Heavy Artillery Battalion. These field officers had all seen previous service in the army. Walter Clark was the only field officer who was a Junior Reservist [under eighteen].⁵² Although very young, and lacking in overall battle experience, these "Juniors" were expected to perform as bravely as seasoned troops. Their counterparts in Virginia, the cadets of the Virginia Military Institute, had fought gallantly during the battle of New Market earlier in the war. Many of them had died. The "Boys' Brigade" here at Bentonville was ten times the strength of the Virginia cadets. The sad reality of placing young boys on the front lines to fight seasoned Union troops had become a

⁴⁹Clark, Histories of the North Carolina Regiments, IV, 51.

⁵⁰Clark, Histories of the North Carolina Regiments, IV, 51.

⁵¹Clark, Histories of the North Carolina Regiments, IV, 4-5.

⁵²Clark, Histories of the North Carolina Regiments, IV, 5.

tragic necessity for the beleaguered Confederacy. The once large southern armies had been depleted greatly by 1865.

General Carlin was awakened on the 19th by musket fire, and upon inquiry he found out that his Union foragers had run into Confederate pickets within five hundred yards of their camp. It was a custom for all foraging parties to leave camp an hour before the main body of troops to "scour" the surrounding countryside for provisions. Never before had the foragers been stopped so near camp. General Carlin obviously became suspicious of Confederate intentions because this opposition prompted him to put on his newest uniform; something which he had been careless about in the past. In the event of death or capture, he wanted his rank to be known.⁵³

The cause of the stiff resistance encountered by the Fourteenth Corps was Dibrell's cavalry. The Union foragers had left camp by 4 A.M. One Union soldier described what he and his companions encountered:

When about two miles out, and just as it began to grow light, the advance [guard] surprised a sleeping picket-post of a few men huddled about a small fire . . . their ragged gray blankets wrapped about their shoulders. They dropped everything that was not tied to them, and ran into the woods. . . . Their guns were bent out of shape, and with their other effects, thrown into the fire. Supposing that these men belonged to Dibrell, and that we were near his camp, we pushed on, hoping to surprise them.⁵⁴

⁵³Carlin, "Bentonville," III, 235-236.

⁵⁴Charles E. Belknap, "Bentonville: What a Bummer Knows About It," War Papers Read before the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, District of Columbia (Washington: Published by the Commandry, 1893), War Paper No. 12, 6-7, hereinafter cited as Belknap, "Bentonville."

It is ironic that this Confederate outpost was caught so easily off guard. As one Union officer later testified, there could have been several reasons:

Dibrell's brigade at this time was very badly demoralized; not more than six hundred strong, poorly supplied with ammunition [sic], driven all the way from Tennessee, they were but mere fragments left of companies, or regiments, while their commander, to use a Georgia saying "cavorted magnaminously." One half of his men were always a little too fast, and the other half a little too slow.⁵⁵

Carlin's foragers continued to follow the trail of Dibrell's cavalry until ". . . it had become quite light."⁵⁶ While riding through a swamp they ran into a second picket line. The results on this occasion proved very different from the previous encounter. One Union cavalry officer explained:

My men fired a few shots at these pickets as we spurred our horses forward and up the hill, when, to our surprise we came in full sight of a line of earthworks, not more than forty rods away. As far as I could see to the right and the left, the dirt from thousands of shovels was flying in the air. The alarm caused by the pickets firing had created confusion in the enemy's camp--officers [began] shouting to their men to fall in line . . . the men throwing their shovels and securing their guns.⁵⁷

These Union riders immediately realized the implications of their discovery. Belknap dispatched one of his best riders to race back to the Union lines with the information. Later, Belknap found out that this courier never made it back to General Carlin to deliver this important message.

⁵⁵ Belknap, "Bentonville," 5-6.

⁵⁶ Belknap, "Bentonville," 7.

⁵⁷ Belknap, "Bentonville," 7.

After making this discovery, Belknap continued his reconnaissance mission. He crossed a dam and stumbled into still another Confederate picket line, this time capturing two prisoners. The General later recalled how they "gave us the information that General Joe Johnston's army was all there."⁵⁸ They further divulged that there were "ten thousand infantry then in the front line building breast works."⁵⁹

In the process of questioning these prisoners, two pieces of Confederate light artillery were spotted across a field by a scouting party. Apparently, the Union cavalrymen were spotted at the same time as this account recalls: "They [the Confederates] opened fire on us, throwing shells higher than the tops of the pine trees through which we passed. This artillery was the first to alarm Carlin's division."⁶⁰

Believing that this commotion was merely a unit of Confederate cavalry possessing a few pieces of artillery, General Slocum ordered Carlin to "attack vigorously and push on."⁶¹ The brigade deployed into line of battle and advanced to "clear the road."⁶² Hampton's cavalry slowly retreated east up the Goldsboro road until they reached the picket lines of Bragg's troops. They passed through the opening and the gap closed. The cavalry, as had been planned, then rode behind

⁵⁸ Belknap, "Bentonville," 8.

⁵⁹ Belknap, "Bentonville," 8.

⁶⁰ Belknap, "Bentonville," 8.

⁶¹ General Jef. C. Davis to Maj. Robert P. Dechert, March 28, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 434.

⁶² Luvaas, "Bentonville," 337.

the Confederate lines to the right flank to reinforce the troops deployed.⁶³

At approximately 10:00 A.M., before General Hardee and his troops could reach the battlefield, the Union columns surged forward. Dibrell's cavalry fell back very slowly. They did not yield a foot of ground before it was wrested from them.⁶⁴ They were inclined to fight; and an old expression of the Atlanta Campaign was reiterated by one Union infantryman: "They didn't drive worth a damn."⁶⁵ Generals Bragg and Stewart had barely gotten their troops into position and sent out skirmishers, before the first line of blue coats could be seen advancing across the newly cultivated fields of the deserted plantation.

Hobart's brigade, which formed the advance unit of Carlin's division, ran into General Hoke's skirmish line first. The Confederate defenders were posted behind rail works which extended for some distance on each side of the Goldsboro road.⁶⁶ General Hobart's brigade was immediately formed into two lines. The right flank consisted of the Eighty-eighth Indiana Infantry, the Thirty-third Ohio, and the Ninety-fourth Ohio Regiments. The left flank or second line was made

⁶³ Manning F. Force, "Marching Across Carolina," Sketches of War History 1861-1865. Papers Read before the Ohio Commandery of the Loyal Legion of the United States (Cincinnati: R. Clarke and Co., 6 volumes, 1888-1908), I, 284, hereinafter cited as Force, "Marching Across Carolina."

⁶⁴ McClurg, "Last Chance," 391.

⁶⁵ McClurg, "Last Chance," 391.

⁶⁶ H. C. Hobart to Capt. James E. Edmonds, March 25, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 452.

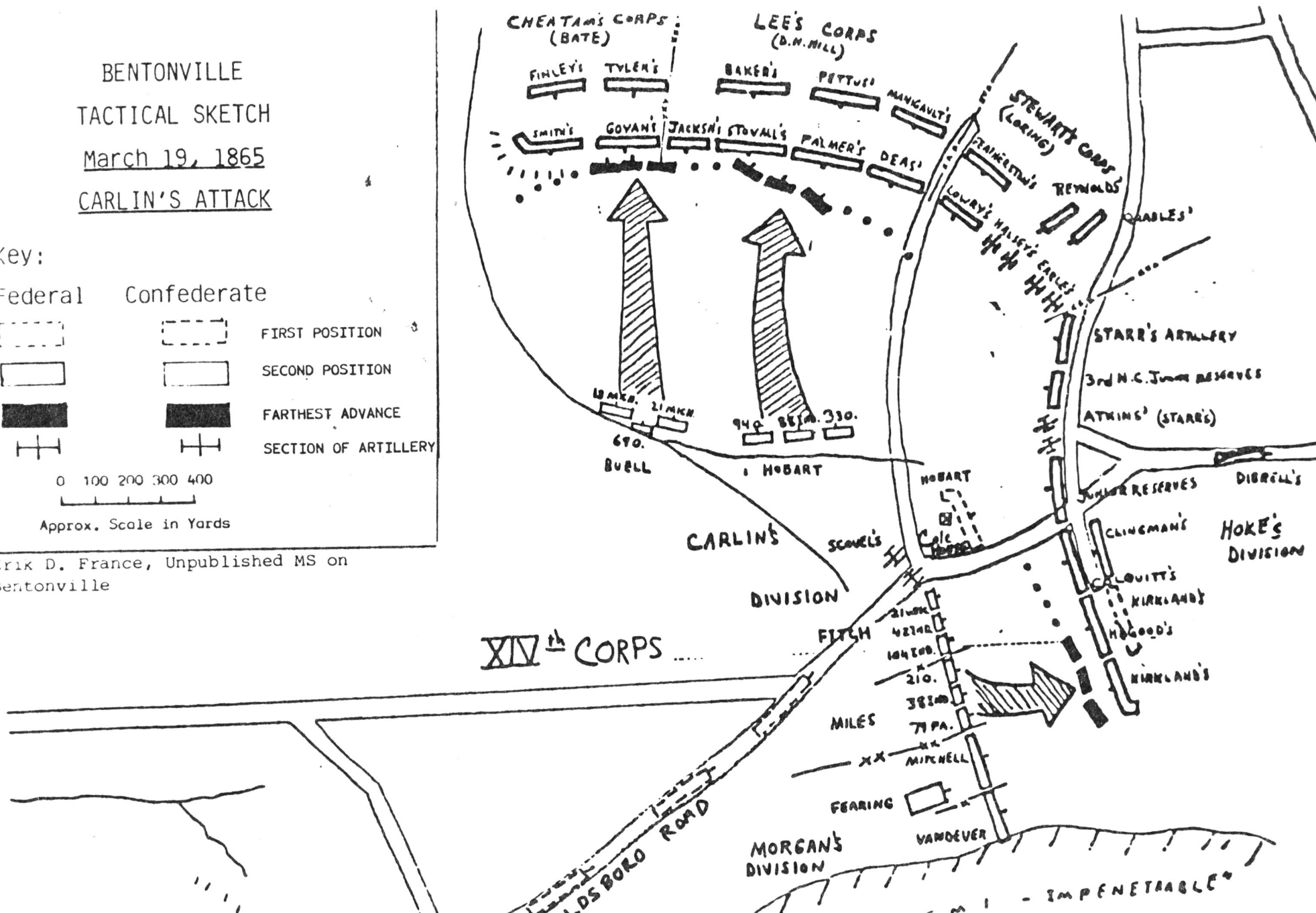
BENTONVILLE
TACTICAL SKETCH
March 19, 1865
CARLIN'S ATTACK

Key:

Federal	Confederate	
		FIRST POSITION
		SECOND POSITION
		FARTHEST ADVANCE
		SECTION OF ARTILLERY

0 100 200 300 400
Approx. Scale in Yards

Erik D. France, Unpublished MS on
Bentonville



up of the Twenty-first Wisconsin Infantry, the Forty-second Indiana, and the One Hundred and fourth Illinois Infantry Regiments. This line was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Michael Fitch. As soon as this alignment of troops was established, two companies were posted on the front line of each regiment to act as skirmishers. These companies under Hobart's command were then ordered to attack so as to discover the extent of the Confederate force in front. Meanwhile, the Confederate skirmish line was withdrawn a distance of about one mile through the woods and underbrush beyond the Cole House to their main lines.⁶⁷ Upon reaching the Cole House, Hobart's troops were suddenly subjected to heavy artillery fire from Atkin's Battery, situated two hundred yards to their front. Hobart immediately ordered his troops to collect fence rails and everything else for barricades. The men, needing no urging to induce them to work, used tin cups and their hands as shovels.

General Slocum was alerted by this sustained fire from his position west of the Cole House and he immediately rode to the front.⁶⁸ The Confederate artillery began to take its toll and it was soon discovered that the open field was affording inadequate cover. Consequently, Hobart discovered a wooded ravine a short distance to the left and front of the Cole House and he divided his command into two equal parts for deployment. He ordered the first section which consisted

⁶⁷H. C. Hobart to James E. Edmonds, March 25, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 453; M. H. Fitch to Capt. J. W. Ford, March 24, 1865, 463.

⁶⁸Henry W. Slocum, "Sherman's March From Savannah to Bentonville," Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, edited by Robert V. Johnson and Clarence C. Buel (New York: The Century Company, 4 volumes, 1888), IV, 692, hereinafter cited as Slocum, "Sherman's March"; W. P. Carlin to Lieut. Col. A. C. Hobart to James E. Edmonds, March 25, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 449; H. C. Hobart to James E. Edmonds, March 25, 1865, 453.

of the Thirty-third Ohio to move into these woods where they hastily built earthworks. About an hour after the Thirty-third Ohio had been moved, Hobart received an order from General Carlin to move the Eighty-eighth Indiana Regiment in line to the left of the former regiment. Furthermore, the Ninety-fourth Ohio was also moved to the left of the Eighty-eighth Indiana. These last two regiments threw up works in prolongation of the line of works already being constructed by the Thirty-third Ohio.⁶⁹ These new entrenchments were built at right angles to the former works constructed in front of the Cole House.

While the Federal First Brigade was engaging the enemy, Colonel George Buell's Second Brigade was ordered to ". . . to move about one mile around the enemy's right [flank] and attack him . . . in the rear if possible."⁷⁰ The movement was immediately initiated and Colonel Buell continued to advance until he came within sight of the enemy. Unfortunately, his troops swung so far to the left of the main road [Goldsboro road], upon forming a brigade line that there proved to be a wide gap to his right between his brigade and that of Hobart's when the latter brigade was brought up to the same line. Before Buell could develop a sustained attack on the enemy, he and his troops were ordered to return and take up a position to the left of Hobart, with his left refused. Temporary barricades were thrown up as quickly as possible. At this time, a heavy line of skirmishers was posted well in front, which extended far to the left where it crossed a road. This road led

⁶⁹ Carlin, "Bentonville," 237; H. C. Hobart to Capt. James E. Edmonds, March 25, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 453.

⁷⁰ Geo. P. Buell to Capt. J. E. Edmonds, March 25, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 467-468.

to the enemy's lines around the left and rear of Buell's position.⁷¹

It was hoped these skirmishers could prevent Confederate troops from outflanking the left part of the Union line.

The other three regiments of Hobart's First Brigade, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel M. H. Fitch of the Twenty-first Wisconsin Volunteers, was placed in position on the right of the Goldsboro road.⁷² Lieutenant Colonel David Miles, leading the Third Brigade, deployed on the right of Fitch's Brigade because the enemy was demonstrating against him on the right flank.⁷³

While all of these dispositions were being implemented, Atkin's Confederate artillery played havoc on the Union lines on each side of the Cole House. Therefore, Lieutenant P. F. Scovel's First Illinois Light Artillery, Battery C, was brought up hurriedly to a position 350 yards in the rear of the Cole House. Fitch's troops supported this artillery.⁷⁴ Scovel's two guns began to take a toll of Bragg's right flank once they had unlimbered. In fact, Brigadier General Daniel Reynolds, a brigade commander in the Army of Tennessee [Confederate], whose troops were protecting Hampton's artillery positions, was hit

⁷¹W. P. Carlin to Lieut. Col. A. C. McClurg, March 28, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 449; H. C. Hobart to James E. Edmonds, March 25, 1865, 453; George P. Buell to Capt. J. E. Edmonds, March 25, 1865, 468.

⁷²W. P. Carlin to Lieut. Col. A. C. McClurg, March 28, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 449.

⁷³W. P. Carlin to Lieut. Col. A. C. McClurg, March 28, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 449.

⁷⁴E. C. Walthall to Maj. R. W. Millsaps, April 8, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 1101; Clark, Histories of the North Carolina Regiments, IV, 351.

by one of these shells, causing him the loss of his leg. The cannonball struck his horse in the chest first, plowed its way through his body, and took off Reynolds' left leg.⁷⁵ The Junior Reserves also found themselves well in range of Scovel's guns, as one member testified: ". . . the never ceasing artillery fire was causing many casualties in our ranks."⁷⁶

By 10 A.M., the Union advance had not progressed more than five miles from camp. General Slocum directed General Kilpatrick to reconnoiter the situation once again with his cavalry to determine more fully the numbers and positions of the enemy; but it turned out his report was no more comprehensive than before.⁷⁷ Slocum was still under the impression that the force confronting him consisted "only of cavalry and a few pieces of artillery."⁷⁸ Fearing that the artillery fire would be heard by General Sherman and misinterpreted for more than a skirmish, Slocum sent Major E. W. Gwindon of his staff to ride southeast to inform the right wing that no assistance was necessary. Slocum's intentions were still to meet Sherman and Howard at Cox's Bridge on the Neuse River that evening as had been ordered that morning.⁷⁹

The morning had slipped away, and General Jefferson Davis knew that whatever Confederate resistance stood in his way must be removed

⁷⁵ B. L. Ridley, "Last Battles of the War," Confederate Veteran, VI (January, 1895), 20, hereinafter cited as Ridley, "Last Battles"; Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 1101.

⁷⁶ Clark, Histories of the North Carolina Regiments, 351.

⁷⁷ Slocum, Life of Slocum, 276.

⁷⁸ Slocum, "Sherman's March," 692.

⁷⁹ Slocum, "Sherman's March," 692.

so that the march could be resumed. Around noon, Davis ordered Carlin's division to attack the Confederate positions to discover their strength. It was Slocum's plan to make repeated assaults at different points along the enemy's front.⁸⁰ Buell and Hobart, whose troops were situated on Carlin's left, were directed to advance and turn the Confederate right flank. Miles' brigade, situated on Carlin's right, below the Goldsboro road, was ordered to turn the enemy left flank [Bragg's troops]. Fitch threw out a strong skirmish line in support of Miles' frontal attack.⁸¹

Buell's brigade moved out of the wooded ravine as directed, and began advancing in perfect order, supported by Hobart's brigade. The distance separating the Union and Confederate positions was approximately 600 yards. Buell's troops could not see the Confederate line clearly because, although they were not entrenched the men [Confederate] availed themselves of time to cut down small pine limbs, which to some extent, hid them from the view of the approaching enemy.⁸² The blue lines pressed on through the uneven terrain. Major L. P. Thomas, commander of Stovall's Forty-second Georgia Volunteers, described the scene unfolding in the front of the Confederate positions:

The small pine trees growing at intervals apart, gave our men an opportunity to see the approaching line of battle several hundred yards from where they were hugging the ground closely, hid to some extent by the pine limbs cut from the nearby trees. It was a grand sight to see them moving on us, "Old Glory" floating in the breeze so proudly. Here they came, our skirmish line gradually giving way and falling back into our

⁸⁰Carlin, "Bentonville," 238.

⁸¹France, Battle of Bentonville Study, March 19, 4.

⁸²L. P. Thomas, "Their Last Battle," Southern Historical Society Papers, XXIX (January-December, 1901), 217, hereinafter cited as Thomas, "Last Battle."

line of battle. I was never more particular and careful in giving officers and men orders to hold their fire. My orders had gone up and down my line repeatedly, instructing the men and officers to keep down . . . and await a sign or orders; even threatening those who should first disobey.⁸³

Tensions began to build in the Confederate line as the Union soldiers drew closer. These were the same Federal troops who had so badly trampled their fighting reputation [Army of Tennessee] during the battles of Nashville and Franklin. Muscles tensed as one eyewitness account reported that:

. . . nearer and nearer they came. . . . Our line had absorbed our skirmishers, and the way was clear in front for the music of the battle to commence. . . . When not over forty or fifty paces from us, the order so anxiously awaited was given, and a sheet of fire blazed out from the hidden battle line . . . that was demoralizing and fatal to the enemy. They battled, reeled, and staggered, while we poured volley after volley into them, and great gaps were made in their line, as brave Federals fell everywhere--their colors would rise and fall just a few feet from us, and many a gallant boy in blue is buried there in those pines who held "Old Glory" up for a brief moment. Their battle line was drawn back in grand style . . . that day, and the arms secured from the fallen foe immediately in our front equipped an entire regiment of our North Carolina soldiers who had inferior guns.⁸⁴

This reference to inferior guns is referring to the fact that portions of Sherman's Army were using several types of repeating rifles. These included Spencers, Sharps, Henrys, and Colts. However, the infantry still used predominately the Springfield and Enfield muzzle loaders.⁸⁵ Breech-loading repeaters enabled the soldier to fire much faster without reloading as often. It was especially advantageous for cavalymen who

⁸⁴ Smithfield Herald (Smithfield), April 26, 1901.

⁸⁵ Pepper, Personal Recollections, 383; Sherman, Memoirs, II, 394-395; Robert H. Strong, A Yankee Private's Civil War (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1911), 191, hereinafter cited as Strong, Yankee Private; Belknap, "Bentonville," 6; Weekly Report of Ordnance by Lieutenant S. K. Banghman, Headquarters, Seventeenth Army Corps, March 24, 1865, Territorial Commands and Armies, Record Group 98, Unbound Document Files, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

needed to fire and reload while at a gallop. Confederate troops were always happy to relieve fallen Union troops of these weapons.

From the Union side, the deadly wall of fire that they had just charged into could not have been any more devastating if the "Johnnies" had been using repeating rifles! A lieutenant in Buell's brigade testified to this fact:

The Rebs held their fire until we were within 3 rods of the works when they opened fire from all sides and gave us an awful volley . . . it looked hard to see intimate friends blown to pieces before your eyes but such is life, I tell you it was a tight place. We charged directly forward upon this line of works which extended two or three miles and was held by Johnston's whole army and as we charged they let us have the whole benefit of their line besides a flank fire. . . . We came up so that men pelted each other with ramrods and butts of muskets and were finally compelled to fall back. . . . Our men in both regiments stood as long as a man could stand and when that was no longer a possibility [we] run like the duce. . . . No mortal man could have done better than our men did.⁸⁶

Hobart's Brigade was given the same reception as that of Buell. His three regiments had advanced but not in line against the waiting Confederate brigades of Stovall's and Palmer's. Hobart must have assumed he was going to strike the extreme right flank,⁸⁷ because the Ninety-fourth Ohio Regiment came within twenty feet of Stovall's works.⁸⁸ However, the right of the Union spearhead barely came within range of the Confederate fire. Hobart's troops saw the damage which was being

⁸⁶ Charles S. Brown to Etta (Brown?), April 26, 1865, Charles Brown Papers, Manuscript Department, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, hereinafter cited as Brown Papers, D.U.M.C.

⁸⁷ C. L. Stevenson to Maj. J. W. Ratchford, March 30, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 1093-1094.

⁸⁸ B. F. Watson, "In the Battle of Bentonville," Confederate Veteran, XXXVII (March, 1929), 95, hereinafter cited as Watson, "In the Battle of Bentonville."

visited on Buell's troops and were easily persuaded to retreat as one rebel officer described their reaction: "A single volley from Stovall sent them scurrying back down the hill, across a narrow hollow, up a short steep hill, and to their breastworks."⁸⁹ One Union captain who kept a diary of the charge confirmed this in his writing: "[We] charged the enemy in the afternoon and were repulsed by superior numbers. Fell back to some temporary works."⁹⁰

While the battlefield was being cleared of the wounded, Major General D. H. Hill and his staff rode down through the ranks of the Army of Tennessee and complimented the troops on their brave repulse of the Union charges. They were also given orders to hold themselves in readiness for an upcoming assault.⁹¹

At the same time that Buell and Hobart charged the Confederate right flank, the Third Brigade, First Division commanded by Colonel Miles, was ordered by Carlin to attack the Confederate left flank. Miles' Brigade was composed of the Twenty-first Ohio Regiment, the Thirty-eighth Indiana, and the Seventy-ninth Pennsylvania. All of these regiments had entrenched on the front line to the right and south of the Cole House. With a wave of the sword, Miles' troops "moved forward

⁸⁹Watson, "In the Battle of Bentonville," 95.

⁹⁰Ferdinand F. Boltz Papers, Memorandum and Expense Book, March 19 entry, Manuscript Department, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, hereinafter cited as Boltz Papers, D.U.M.C.

⁹¹L. P. Thomas, "Reminiscences of the Forty-second Georgia," Confederate Veteran, XII (January, 1904), 14, hereinafter cited as Thomas, "Reminiscences."

in good order through a dense thicket and swamp. . . ."92 General Hoke, informed of the Union advance moving through the swamp toward him, brought up Kirkland's Brigade which had been held in reserve in the second line of defense. Hoke placed these troops on Hagood's left.⁹³ Kirkland was no sooner in position when he was hit by a direct Union frontal assault. Miles' troops charged again and again, but were not able to carry the Confederate works "in consequence of the impenetrable thicket and the depth of the swamp; and . . . [for reason] that the enemy moved heavy columns on the right flank."⁹⁴ In reality, the Union attack had been handsomely repulsed, leaving a good many dead and wounded men and abandoned rifles.⁹⁵ Hoke's skirmish line was immediately re-established and the wounded were brought in. The Confederate loss had been small but General Bragg had panicked in the midst of the determined Union assaults. Strongly convinced that Hoke was going to be driven from his positions,⁹⁶ he sent an urgent request for strong reinforcements.⁹⁷

As Miles' troops regrouped in their original lines, they were ordered to charge again. However, just as the second advance got

⁹²D. Miles to J. E. Edmonds, March 28, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 473.

⁹³Hagood, Memoirs, 358.

⁹⁴D. Miles to J. E. Edmonds, March 28, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 473.

⁹⁵Hagood, Memoirs, 358.

⁹⁶Johnston, Narrative of Military Operations, 386.

⁹⁷Johnston, Narrative of Military Operations, 386.

underway, Miles was severely wounded, and consequently, the fighting subsided into an extended skirmish.⁹⁸ The loss in these two assaults by Miles was described by General Carlin as "very great on account of the character of the officers and the men who fell."⁹⁹

Around 11:00 A.M., while Lieutenant Colonel Miles was struggling with General Hoke's troops in the dense thickets south of the Goldsboro road, General James Morgan's Second Division of the Fourteenth Corps arrived to take up position¹⁰⁰ on the right of Miles' troops. The Second Division was comprised of the brigades of Generals William Vandever, J. G. Mitchell, and Benjamin Fearing. While deploying into their assigned position to the right of Miles, General Mitchell's troops were forced to wade through a thick swamp.¹⁰¹ Mitchell placed three regiments on the front line and two on the second. Vandever's Brigade formed to the right of Mitchell. Benjamin Fearing's Brigade was held in reserve behind Mitchell's two lines. These brigades, which

⁹⁸ D. Miles to J. E. Edmonds, March 28, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 473-474; W. P. Carlin to Col. A. C. McClurg, March 28, 1865, 450.

⁹⁹ Carlin, "Bentonville," 238.

¹⁰⁰ The reader should realize that the Fourteenth and Twentieth Corps were strung out for miles west of the area where the battle was taking place and these troops were constantly moving forward on the muddy roads only as fast as the troops immediately in front of them were able to move. James D. Morgan to Lieut. Col. A. C. McClurg, March 29, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 485; Daily Ledger of General John Mitchell, Headquarters, Second Brigade, Second Division, Fourteenth Army Corps, March 19 entry, 1865, Territorial Commands and Armies, Record Group 98, Unbound Document Files, National Archives, Washington, D.C., hereinafter cited as Mitchell Ledger.

¹⁰¹ Mitchell Ledger, March 19 entry.

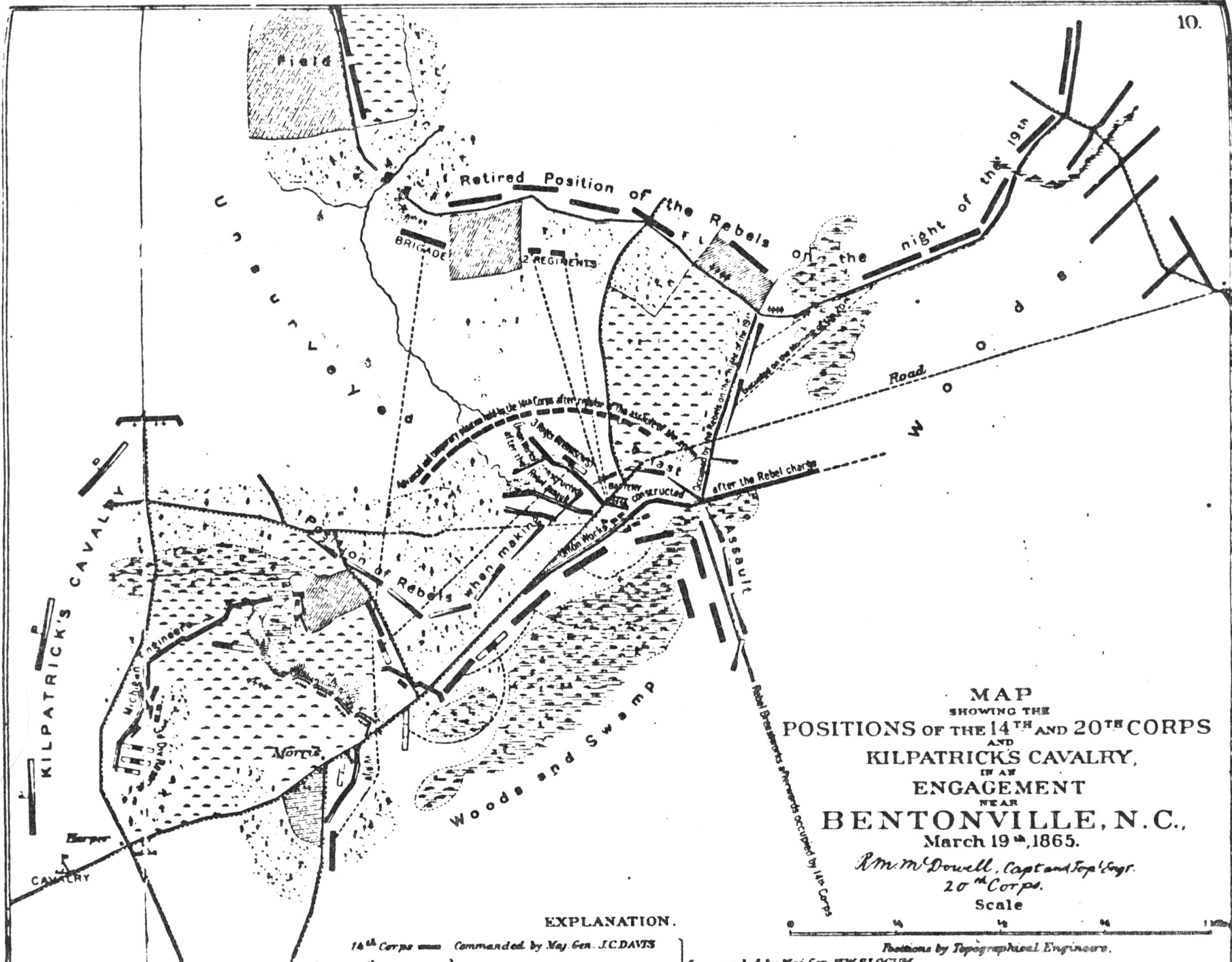
MAP
SHOWING THE
POSITIONS OF THE 14TH AND 20TH CORPS
AND
KILPATRICK'S CAVALRY,
IN AN
ENGAGEMENT
NEAR
BENTONVILLE, N. C.,
March 19th, 1865.

Rm. M'Dowell, Capt and Top' Engr.
20th Corps.
Scale

EXPLANATION.

14th Corps ——— Commanded by Maj. Gen. J. C. DAVIS

Positions by Topographical Engineers.



constituted Morgan's entire division, took considerable time in fortifying their positions. They made sure they were protected by formidable log works. These men had no entrenching tools, and were compelled to use hatchets to build these works.¹⁰² The end result was a substantial fortress, which in the end proved of immense value to Sherman's army, and probably to Sherman's reputation.¹⁰³ Heavy skirmishing was continued to the front and left of these troops the entire time they were preparing their defenses.¹⁰⁴

There was one glaring weakness in the Union position. Hobart's Brigade was exposed to a flank attack from General Bragg as well as enfilading fire from Atkin's artillery battery situated at right angles and on the other side of the open field.¹⁰⁵ This gap was filled by Robinson's newly arrived brigade from the Twentieth Corps. Scovel's artillery battery was moved back behind Buell's position to support him and the Nineteenth Indiana Independent Light Battery, commanded by Lieutenant S. D. Webb, was situated to the right and front of Robinson's Brigade.¹⁰⁶ However, Robinson's left flank was still exposed so General Slocum found it necessary to ask General Carlin to fall back across a creek. This would enable his troops to present one continuous

¹⁰²James D. Morgan to Lt. Col. A. C. McClurg, March 29, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 485; J. S. Robinson to Capt. E. K. Buttrick, March 27, 1865, 666.

¹⁰³Carlin, "Bentonville," 239.

¹⁰⁴Mitchell Ledger, March 19 entry.

¹⁰⁵Luvaas, "Bentonville," 341.

¹⁰⁶Luvaas, "Bentonville," 341; Charles Houghtaling to Lt. Col. A. C. McClurg, March 30, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, Part I, 575-576.

line if the enemy attacked. However, Carlin neglected to carry out this request and Robinson, weakened by the need of two of his regiments elsewhere, remained unprotected on his flanks.¹⁰⁷ Thus, a situation had evolved where two Union divisions, plus one brigade, comprising scarcely 10,000 men, supported by a battery of artillery, found themselves face to face with an enemy who had chosen its own battleground and had strengthened it with field works and formidable artillery. Union estimates of Confederate troop strengths ran as high as 40,000-50,000 men. A rumor had even spread that General Lee was behind Confederate lines commanding the battle.¹⁰⁸

Although Carlin's troops had taken a beating in their assault against the Confederate lines, one important result occurred. Three Confederate soldiers escaped by mingling with Buell's withdrawing troops as they withdrew after their repulse. Upon reaching the Union entrenchments, they immediately surrendered and were taken before General Carlin. One of the men in gray stepped forward and professed to be the spokesman and insisted to see the general in command. Carlin told him he had found the correct person. In a few brief sentences, the prisoner related that he and his companions were former Union soldiers who had

¹⁰⁷W. P. Carlin to Lt. Col. A. C. McClurg, March 28, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 449-451.

¹⁰⁸Henry V. Boynton, Sherman's Historical Raid, The Memoirs in Light of the Record (Cincinnati: Wilstach, Baldwin and Co., 1875), 210, hereinafter cited as Boynton, Sherman's Raid; Mark Anthony De Wolfe Howe (ed.), Marching With Sherman. Passages from the Letters and Campaign Diaries of Henry Hitchcock, Major and Assistant Adjutant General of the Volunteers November 1864-May 1865 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1927), 273, hereinafter cited as Howe, Marching With Sherman; Diary, One Hundred and Third Illinois; McClurg, "Last Chance," 392.

been captured. To avoid starvation in prison, they saw their only alternative was to enlist in the Confederate Army, with the intention of escaping at the first opportunity. This man went on to say that General Joseph Johnston was in command of the army which had just man-gled the Fourteenth Corps so badly. Not only was Johnston commanding the troops but he said that Beauregard, Bragg, Hardee, and Cheatham were present.¹⁰⁹ He stated that "Johnston . . . had ridden through the several divisions of their army, and made speeches, calculated to incite the troops to desperate efforts to overthrow the left wing of Sherman's army. These generals . . . told their plans openly to their men, which were to destroy the left wing, and then turn to the right and destroy that."¹¹⁰ Carlin ascertained this information to be of such importance that he directed Major J. E. Edwards, his only remaining staff officer, to take the spokesman for the prisoners directly to Generals Davis or Slocum. In order that no time would be wasted, Carlin gave the man his horse to ride.¹¹¹

Major Edwards located Generals Davis and Slocum, who were sitting on their horses behind the lines,¹¹² and delivered a dispatch and the prisoner. The message read as follows:

¹⁰⁹Carlin, "Bentonville," 239-240; W. P. Carlin to Col. A. C. McClurg, March 28, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 449; Slocum, "Sherman's March," 692.

¹¹⁰Carlin, "Bentonville," 240.

¹¹¹Carlin, "Bentonville," 240.

¹¹²Slocum, "Sherman's March," 692.

General: I attacked the enemy with Buell's Brigade and half of Hobart's but failed to drive the enemy. The same result attended the attack on the right by Miles' brigade. The enemy is strong in men and artillery. A prisoner, a New York man, whom I have sent to you, says, Hardee, Hoke, Lee's corps, and a great deal of artillery are in our front. I shall hold my position until further orders from you.¹¹³

Within minutes, a second staff officer of Slocum's galloped up and announced, ". . . general, I find a great deal more than Dibbrell's cavalry. I find infantry entrenched along our whole front, and enough of them to give us all the amusement we shall want for the rest of the day."¹¹⁴

General Slocum was unsure whether to believe the story of the deserter so he began asking him pointed questions. The New Yorker repeated his story just as he had done to General Carlin. Upon hearing that he [the prisoner] was from Syracuse and had entered the service in a company raised by Captain Butler, Slocum was still undecided because he had formerly been a resident of Syracuse and knew the history of the company and the regiment he was describing.¹¹⁵ Slocum found it hard to decide if this man was an imposter. He described this man as "an emaciated sickly appearing young man about twenty-two or twenty-three years of age."¹¹⁶ The statement that Johnston and his officers had ridden up and down the lines of infantry bragging about their intentions to smash the left wing seemed somewhat unusual knowing

¹¹³W. P. Carlin to Bvt. Maj. Gen. Jef. C. Davis, March 19, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, Part II, 906.

¹¹⁴McClurg, "Last Chance," 392.

¹¹⁵Slocum, "Sherman's March," 692.

¹¹⁶Slocum, "Sherman's March," 692.

the characters of Joe Johnston and Braxton Bragg.¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, all suspicions to the prisoner's true identity vanished when an aide, Major William Tracy, came riding up to deliver a message and ". . . recognized the deserter as an old acquaintance whom he had known in Syracuse before the war."¹¹⁸

The positive confirmation of the prisoner's identity immediately convinced Slocum of the dangerous situation his army was in. Unfortunately, he had sent a message to General Sherman just a few minutes before assuring him that he needed no assistance. He had no alternative but to dispatch another rider for help.¹¹⁹ There were differences of opinion among Slocum's staff by which course of action to take in the face of this strong Confederate force. One overzealous officer suggested the following plan:

. . . You ought to have the advance division charge and drive them [Confederates] out of the way. . . . It could not be possible that there was [sic] much force ahead of us, and that if we waited for the others to come up we should lose a whole day, and if it should turn out that there was nothing to justify such caution it would look bad for the left wing; to which Slocum replied in an earnest manner, "I can afford to be charged with being dilatory or over-cautious, but I cannot afford the responsibility of another Ball's Bluff affair."¹²⁰

The youngest member of General Slocum's staff, Joseph Foraker, had been present during the entire discussion. He later told the effect the conversation had on him: "It excited my confidence and admiration,

¹¹⁷Slocum, "Sherman's March," 692.

¹¹⁸Slocum, "Sherman's March," 692.

¹¹⁹Slocum, "Sherman's March," 692.

¹²⁰Slocum, "Sherman's March," 693.

and was the first moment that I began to feel that there was really a serious work before us. . . ."121 Foraker was very surprised when Slocum turned to him and gave him a hastily written message and told him to take it to Sherman as fast as possible. As he left, Slocum remarked, "ride well to the right so as to keep clear of the enemy's left flank, and don't spare horse-flesh."122

Slocum knew that he must make some hasty decisions to alleviate the precarious situation he was now in. Dispatch riders were ordered down the Goldsboro road to hurry up the two divisions of the Twentieth Corps which had been at the rear of the column that morning.123 The roads were very muddy and he knew the wagon trains were bound to have mired down.124 With troops and wagons strung out over miles of bad roads, he feared that reinforcements might arrive too late. Slocum's only consolation at that time was the fact that Robinson's Brigade had been able to arrive earlier than the remainder of the Twentieth Corps to provide some reinforcements.125

Slocum's urgent message for help was soon received by General Alpheus Williams. As commander of the Twentieth Corps, he ordered his First Division to march forward at double quick toward the noise of

¹²¹Slocum, "Sherman's March," 693.

¹²²Slocum, "Sherman's March," 693.

¹²³Benson J. Lossing, Pictorial History of the Civil War in the United States of America (Hartford: Thomas Belknap, 3 vols., 1877), III, 500, hereinafter cited as Lossing, Pictorial History.

¹²⁴Carlin, "Bentonville," 239.

¹²⁵Lossing, Pictorial History, III, 500.

battle. Private Robert Strong and his comrades in the Twentieth Corps, 105th Illinois Regiment had been hearing the constant rumble of guns in the distance all morning. Strong later recalled that:

About noon, a courier came dashing back, his horse all lather. He hung his head but kept on the run. The courier never halted at the head of our column, but shouted as he kept going, "Hurry up, boys, the Johnnies have got the First driven into a trap and are giving them Hell." We knew what the next word would be, of course, and every man tightened his belt for a run. . . . Our brigade bugle [then] sounded: "Attention. Forward March, Double Quick!" We actually ran eight miles without a halt. That is, some did. Some played out and fell down and were run over by the rest. . . . As we advanced, the sound of battle became plainer and nearer. . . ."126

While Slocum's troops busily reinforced their defense perimeter, the Confederate army had also strengthened its lines. General Hardee's troops had arrived on the battlefield shortly before three o'clock and deployed. One South Carolinian in General Taliaferro's Division graphically described the scene as his brigade approached the battlefield:

. . . as we marched hurriedly along the road in the direction of the firing we passed a number of wounded men coming to the rear; and then several operating tables on both sides of the road, some with wounded men stretched out on them with the surgeons at work, and all of them with several bloody amputated legs and arms thrown alongside on the grass. The sight was temporarily depressing, as it foreshadowed what we had to expect.¹²⁷

Taliaferro's force of approximately 2,000 men were hurried down the fork of the Bentonville road to the battlefield was badly needed to strengthen the Confederate right flank. As the men drew nearer to the Cole Plantation the signs of a battle became increasingly evident as

¹²⁶ Strong, Yankee Private, 189.

¹²⁷ Arthur P. Ford and Marion J. Ford, Life in the Confederate Army (New York: Neale Publishing Company, 1905), 55, hereinafter cited as Ford and Ford, Life in the Confederate Army.

one participant recalled:

. . . we hurried on, and our division halted for a few moments on the ground from which the Federals had just been repulsed, and there was quite a number of their dead and wounded lying about. Twelve or fifteen wounded Federals had been gathered in from the immediate front, and they entreated our men for water, which some of us gladly supplied, even to the emptying of several canteens, at which we knew was an important time. One of our men--a thrifty fellow, who always manages to have things--produced a little flask of whisky, and gave a good drink to a Federal who had his leg badly crushed. The bluecoat raised his eyes to Heaven with, "Thank God, Johnnie; it may come around that I may be able to do you a kindness, and I'll never forget this drink of liquor." We were not allowed to remain long relieving the suffering. . . .¹²⁸

General Johnston was relieved at the way his troops had repulsed the Union assaults. However, he found himself in virtually the same predicament as General Slocum's Fourteenth Corps--too few troops positioned in the wrong places! Johnston sent Taliaferro's division to the right of the Confederate flank as reserve for Cheatham's Corps. General Lafayette McLaws' Division was sent to reinforce Bragg's position. Bragg had appealed for reinforcements because of being "hard-pressed" by General Miles' assaulting troops. McLaws moved up to deploy on General Hoke's left "with great difficulty, due to a very dense swamp, [and] the officers who were sent to guide me . . . lost their way every time."¹²⁹ General Bragg was later criticized for requesting reinforcements amounting to an entire division, when there was a greater need for them on the right flank.¹³⁰ Hoke's division had admirably

¹²⁸ Arthur P. Ford, "Last Battles of Hardee's Corps," The Southern Bivouac, I (July, 1885), 140, hereinafter cited as Ford, "Last Battles."

¹²⁹ McLaws Order Book, March 19 entry.

¹³⁰ Hampton, "Bentonville," 703-4; Barrett, Sherman's March, 166; Johnston, Narrative of Military Operations, 386.

repulsed Miles' determined attacks and had suffered few losses. Lieutenant General Wade Hampton, disagreed with General Johnston's decision to send Bragg reinforcements and believed it ultimately proved to be a primary reason for the Confederates' inability to repulse the Union Fourteenth Corps. Hampton later remarked, "This movement was in my judgment the only mistake committed on our part during the fight, and when the General [Johnston] notified me of the intended change in the plans, I advised that we should adhere to the one agreed on. It would be a great presumption in me to criticize any movement directed by General Johnston . . . had not the general in his report stated that this movement was a mistake."¹³¹ Hampton also suggested that Hardee's late arrival and his inability to fill the center of the Confederate line assigned to him, enabled the Fourteenth Corps to have sufficient time to regroup and enable the Twentieth Corps to reinforce it. Hampton stated further that: "It thus happened that though the attack of the Fourteenth Corps was repulsed early in the morning, our counter-attack was delayed until quite late in the afternoon, when we encountered a force double that met, in the morning, and found them behind breast-works."¹³² In essence, Hampton believed Slocum's Fourteenth Corps could have been decisively defeated if General Johnston had stuck to the original battle plan that had been agreed upon the previous evening.

¹³¹ Hampton, "Bentonville," 704-705.

¹³² Hampton, "Bentonville," 704.

The Confederate troops felt confident after their morning repulse of Carlin's troops, but by 2:00 P.M. they were beginning to become restless. General Stewart rode up and down the lines reassuring the troops and telling them a charge was imminent.¹³³ To help pass the time and ease tension, ". . . regimental bands played some music that gave . . . an uplift and inspiration for the coming foray. . . ." ¹³⁴

The delay in action not only affected the enlisted men but the officers as well. General Hampton urged Johnston to immediately attack:

General: With one regiment I am trying to get to Wheeler, or on the flank of the enemy. Butler is on the road behind you, and a part of Dibbrell's command. . . . Taliaferro is just going in. I think whatever we do should be done quickly. An advance of the line would break them, I think.¹³⁵

With Hardee's troops in position, Johnston felt he could safely order a charge. He planned a general attack for 2:45 P.M. which gave all of the commands time to ready themselves.¹³⁶ However, as is frequently the outcome in situations where loose ends are trying to be tied, delays would be the rule of the day. General Bate, commander of Cheatham's Corps, made a reconnaissance along the front and found areas where adjustments were needed before a charge could be undertaken. Thus, he explained in a report:

¹³³Smithfield Herald, April 26, 1901.

¹³⁴Robert W. Sanders, "The Battle of Bentonville," Confederate Veteran, XXXIV (August, 1926), 299, hereinafter cited as Sanders, "Bentonville."

¹³⁵Wade Hampton to General Johnston, March 19, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 1437-1438.

¹³⁶Ridley, "Last Battles," 20.

. . . the left of the enemy's line, at least his front line, did not extend connectedly at all beyond my right, and there being a division (Taliaferro's) lying in reserve in my immediate right, I urged that it make a detour, passing beyond my extreme right, and be thrown upon the left flank of the enemy.¹³⁷

This adjustment in the line was adopted by Johnston, but it necessitated delaying off the attack for half an hour. While this new alignment was being carried out on the right flank, McLaws' Division was throwing up breastworks. McLaws explained the disposition of his troops: "Col. Stockhouse's [3rd] Regiment, S.C., Kennedy's Brigade was sent to Hoke's left and a connection was made by pickets from my right. Kennedy occupied the main road and field in his front."¹³⁸ Connor's and Fiser's Brigades were placed on the front line to the left of Stackhouse's Regiment. Harrison's and Hardy's Brigades were deployed behind and adjacent to these troops. These brigades formed into a line which extended deep into the woods and thickets.¹³⁹ The Confederate line was now complete in its "sickle" shaped formation.

Johnston's hope of routing the Fourteenth Corps was affected by these delays. By 2:00 P.M., the Twentieth Corps had begun to arrive on the battleground. Colonel William Hawley's Second Brigade marched up and added over 1,200 troops to the Union defenses.¹⁴⁰ Hawley's troops formed approximately 400 yards to the west of Robinson's troops.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ Report of William B. Bates, March 28, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 1106.

¹³⁸ McLaws Order Book, March 19 entry.

¹³⁹ France, Battle of Bentonville Study, March 19, 8.

¹⁴⁰ Barrett, Sherman's March, 168.

¹⁴¹ J. S. Robinson to Capt. E. K. Buttrick, March 27, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 666.

Shortly afterwards, Colonel James Selfridge arrived with his Second Brigade and was ordered to entrench to Hawley's left.¹⁴²

Webb's Nineteenth Indiana Artillery had kept up a running barrage of fire with several Confederate artillery pieces since 1:00 P.M. However, Halsey's battery, part of Hampton's light horse artillery, had been ordered to remain silent all afternoon. An interesting story evolved from this order as one artilleryman reminisced:

. . . Our battery was placed in the center with orders to remain quiet until further instructions. Shortly afterward, the enemy opened on us. We had to lie down behind our guns for several hours under hot fire without the privilege of replying.¹⁴³

Presently, one of these shells from Webb's guns killed Thomas Chew, one of Halsey's artillerymen. Soon the range was found again and one Max Cohen was also struck down. Ironically, these two men had participated in a duel at sunrise that morning and neither one of them had been hurt! The reason was that their seconds [assistants in the duel] had agreed before the affair to load each of the dueler's guns with blanks. Fate worked in a curious way on this occasion. Two random artillery shells had accomplished what both of the men had tried to accomplish that morning.

The Union artillery's effectiveness persuaded General Johnston to order Halsey to open fire.¹⁴⁴ The range was quickly found by Halsey's

¹⁴²Jas. L. Selfridge to Capt. E. K. Buttrick, March 28, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 612.

¹⁴³Ashley Halsey, Jr., "The Last Duel of the Confederacy," Civil War Times Illustrated (November, 1962), 31, hereinafter cited as Halsey, "Last Duel."

¹⁴⁴Halsey, "Last Duel," 31.

twelve-pound Napoleons. With eight of these guns [Napoleons] spewing shot, the Confederates held a three to one advantage in firepower over Webb's four light guns. One of these shells made a direct hit on a Union ammunition chest and caused it to explode, wounding two men and killing several horses.¹⁴⁵

General Robinson, whose regiments formed the center of the Union line, saw a chance to take some "pot-shots" at the Confederate lines. He ordered several of his best sharpshooters to take up positions inside the Cole House. The brigade of Junior Reserves soon became a close target and as one of the boys recalled, "for some time . . . the sharpshooters . . . did excellent practice on our line."¹⁴⁶ This molesting fire went on until Captain Atkins found the range of the house with two of his Napoleons: "A few well directed shells caused them to pour out like rats out of a sinking ship."¹⁴⁷

By 2:30 P.M. the Army of Tennessee had virtually completed preparations for the attack. Major General D. H. Hill informed General Stevenson that his troops would be "the division of direction" of the forthcoming charge, meaning his unit would lead in the advance and the remainder of the right flank would orient its line of assault with that of his men.¹⁴⁸ Upon hearing the order Stevenson reflected on past battles he had participated in: "My experience with this army has

¹⁴⁵ Clinton Keeler to Maj. Charles Houghtaling, March 25, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 579-580.

¹⁴⁶ Clark, Histories of the North Carolina Regiments, IV, 57.

¹⁴⁷ Clark, Histories of the North Carolina Regiments, IV, 57.

¹⁴⁸ C. L. Stevenson to Maj. J. W. Ratchford, March 30, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 1094.

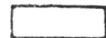
BENTONVILLE
TACTICAL SKETCH
March 19, 1865

2:30 P.M.

Key:

Federal

Confederate



INFANTRY



SKIRMISH LINE



SECTION OF
ARTILLERY

0 100 200 300 400

APPROX. SCALE IN YARDS

rik D. France, Unpublished MS on
Bentonville

SELFIDGE

HAWLEY

JACKSON'S
DIVISION

XXth CORPS

XXXX
(SLOCUM)

1 MICHIGAN
ENGINEERS

GOLDSBORO ROAD

XIVth CORPS

MORGAN'S
DIVISION

ROBINSON
(Jackson's
Division)

SCOVILLE'S

CARLIN'S
DIVISION

940. 88TH. 330.
MOBART

BOELL

LEE'S CORPS
(DANIEL)

CHEATAM'S CORPS
(BATE)

TALIAFERRO'S
DIVISION
(HARDEE)

(STEWART)

STEWART'S CORPS
(GOULD)

KYLE
(JOHNSTON)

STARR'S

(BRA)

3rd N.C. INF. REGTS

ATRINE'S (STARR'S)

JUNIOR RESERVES

HOKES

CUMMANT

COLAVITTE

HAGOOD'S

MERLAND'S

3rd S.C.

HEARSON'S

COMBES'S

HALEY'S

FITCH

MILES

FEARING

VANDEVER

"SEMI-IMPENETRABLE"

convinced me that one of the greatest obstacles in the way of our success in assaulting the fortified positions of the enemy has been caused by a failure to keep the commands properly aligned, and to move them straight to the front."¹⁴⁹ For some unknown reason this precedent had been set early in the war. In attack formations, Confederate officers did not place great emphasis on preserving straight alignments. Troops usually advanced at a run, every man more or less for himself. In contrast, Union officers attempted to keep their regiments as aligned as possible while marching in battle.¹⁵⁰

Just before orders to advance were made, one Major A. Burnette Rhett, an artillery officer, rode down through the gray lines of anxious troops and announced that news had been received that France had recognized the Confederacy and would send warships to open southern ports immediately. The result was exuberance mixed with the reality of the situation as one soldier testified: "The men cheered, a few of us realizing that the end was so near. We were blinded by our patriotism."¹⁵¹ Morale must be high for the charge and some officers were willing to go to any length to insure it. Somewhat further down the line of entrenchments, the tone was somewhat more dismal, as one soldier was overheard in saying, "Well, boys, one out of every three of us will drop to-day. I wonder who it will be?"¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹C. L. Stevenson to Maj. J. W. Ratchford, March 30, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 1094.

¹⁵⁰Ford and Ford, Life in the Confederate Army, 58.

¹⁵¹Ford and Ford, Life in the Confederate Army, 56.

¹⁵²Ford and Ford, Life in the Confederate Army, 56.

The designated time for the attack arrived and General Johnston hoped the battle plan was fully understood.¹⁵³ It was 2:45 P.M. as the right wing left the protection of their defense works and began the Confederate advance. Two lines of gray moved forward in perfect order in the direction of Buell's and Hobart's entrenchments which were approximately six hundred yards distant.¹⁵⁴ After having advanced about two hundred yards, they came under fire. The aligned Confederate lines staggered from the first volley of fire but continued the advance.¹⁵⁵ Smith's Brigade, which was situated in the front line of Cheatham's corps, was the only part of the Confederate line to falter. This brigade had problems advancing through its own abatis and consequently could not move forward properly.¹⁵⁶

The line of entrenchments occupied by the Junior Reserves afforded the best view of the advancing Army of Tennessee. One Reservist gave a vivid description of the unfolding spectacle before them:

Several officers led the charge on horseback across an open field in full view, with colors flying and a line of battle in such perfect order as to be able to distinguish the several field officers in proper place and followed by a battery which dashed at full gallop, wheeled, unlimbered, and opened fire. It looked like a picture and at our distance was truly beautiful. It was gallantly done, but it was a painful sight to see how their battle flags were together, regiments being scarcely larger than companies and a division not much larger than a regiment should be.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ Johnston, Narrative of Military Operations, 387.,

¹⁵⁴ C. L. Stevenson to Maj. J. W. Ratchford, March 30, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 1094.

¹⁵⁵ Report of Maj. Gen. Wm. Bate, March 28, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 1108.

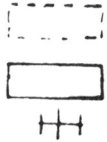
¹⁵⁶ Report of Maj. Gen. Wm. Bate, March 28, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 1108.

¹⁵⁷ Clark, Histories of the North Carolina Regiments, IV, 21.

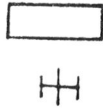
BENTONVILLE
TACTICAL SKETCH
March 19, 1865
THE MAIN ATTACK
2:45-3:45 P.M.

Solid black line indicates furthest extent Confederate advance.

Confederates



Federals



0 100 200 300 400
Approx. Scale in Yards

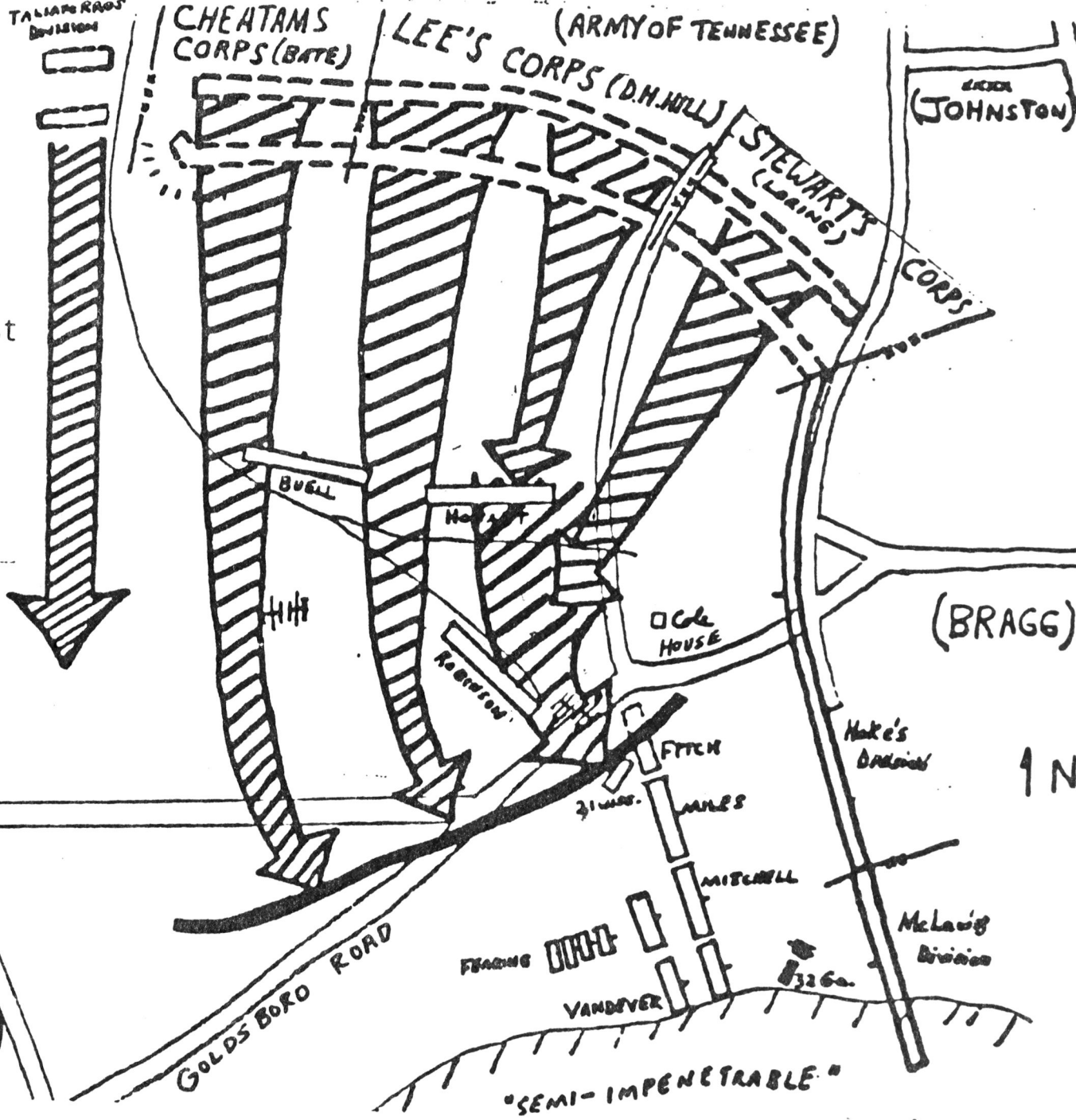
Erik D. France,
Unpublished MS
on Bentonville



Jackson's
Division



XXXX
(SLOCUM)



The gap between the Union and Confederate lines closed quickly as the divisions of butternut clad soldiers pressed on, still holding their fire. However, the terrain presented problems along the line of advance, especially on the extreme right flank. One Confederate private recalled that: "Our line became so disorganized in the charge, from the thickness of the woods, that it halted on the edge of the field for re-establishment."¹⁵⁸ General Buell's troops had not succeeded in completing their breastworks before they had to drop their digging tools and grab their rifles to fire on the rapidly advancing Confederate columns. Buell's two brigades were able to punish portions of the Army of Tennessee with their withering first round of fire.¹⁵⁹ In fact, General Bate's division was temporarily thrown into confusion by the first fire from Buell's men. A member of Bate's division later recalled:

Reaching the top of the slope we came in view of the Federal line and if our eyes had been closed our ears would have given us ample evidence of the fact. The rattle of the Enfields and the hiss of the minnies marked the renewal of our acquaintance with our old antagonists of the Dalton and Atlanta campaign. Down the slope we charged . . . and the enemy line is only a hundred yards away. The "zips" of the minnies get thicker and thicker and the line partially demoralized by the heavy fire, suddenly halts. . . . Inspired by this example [the color bearer of the First Florida goes on alone with his flag held high], or recovering from the temporary panic, the line moves forward again, and the enemy deserts their breastworks and makes for the rear at double-quick.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Clark, Histories of the North Carolina Regiments, IV, 21.

¹⁵⁹ Ford, "Last Battles," 142.

¹⁶⁰ Walter A. Clark, Under the Stars and Bars of Memoirs of Four Years of Service with the Olgethorpes of August, Georgia (Augusta: Chronical Printing Co., 1900), 192, hereinafter cited as Clark, Stars and Bars.

As Elliot's Brigade in Taliaferro's Division reached the first Union videttes, an interesting occurrence took place:

We ran right over the Federal picket line and captured or shot every one of the pickets. One picket was in the act of eating his dinner, and as we ran upon him he dropped his tin bucket [containing] rice and peas. . . . Our lieutenant grabbed it up, and carried it, with the spoon still in the porridge, in his left hand in the charge. . . . During this movement the lieutenant ate the captured porridge, and gave me the empty tin bucket and spoon.¹⁶¹

The advance of the extreme right flank of the Confederate line continued to be plagued by a combination of the thick woods and the harsh barrage of rifle fire coming from General Carlin's defenders. During this period of confusion, Scovel's artillery batteries were rolled into position to further damage the rebel onslaught. The effect of this barrage of shells soon proved deadly as one South Carolinian attested:

Our orders now were to charge directly across the field, Elliot's Brigade leading. The men started out at double-quick . . . when they were met with rapid volley's of grape and cannister shot, besides a heavy rifle-fire. . . . My eyes were in a moment filled with sand dashed up by the grape which struck around. I wiped them with my hand, and keeping them closed as much as I could, kept on a run until I suddenly realized that I was practically alone. . . . The men held on well until within about fifty yards of the Federal line, when they suddenly wavered, halted, and then retired with the utmost precipitation. A panic had seized this brigade, incomprehensible as it was inexcusable. . . . It is needless to say I followed. . . .¹⁶²

Private Robert Sanders, a soldier in Elliot's Brigade, confirmed that the "vociferous" rebel yells had a detrimental effect on this charge

¹⁶¹Ford and Ford, Life in the Confederate Army, 56-57.

¹⁶²Ford, "Last Battles," 142; Ford and Ford, Life in the Confederate Army, 58-59.

because ". . . it enabled the waiting Yankees to locate us and prepare fully to pour shot and shell . . . into our ranks with great rapidity and with fatal effect."¹⁶³ In the midst of this charge, one member of Taliaferro's Division was heard to say in a plaintive tone, "If the Lord will only see me safe through this job, I'll register an oath never to vote for secession again as long as I live."¹⁶⁴

The Confederate attack met with more success further down the lines to the east. Union troops fled from their entrenchments in great numbers because the enemy drive was so fierce. The battlefield was littered with many bodies. The assault took a heavy toll. One participant described the grisly scene: ". . . as we advanced, we passed over the bodies of the enemy [Union] who had been killed in the assault and whose faces, from exposure to the sun, had turned almost black."¹⁶⁵

Many of the Federal troops had been forced to abandon their entrenchments in such a hurry that they had left all of their belongings in place. One account told of several items confiscated which were not of military use:

. . . as far as I could see the line had left its baggage--knapsacks, plunder, etc. Some of our men grabbed up the knapsacks, and one of our company, Frank Lee, found a silk dress, while some found ladies garments and deguerrotypes, and one of Captain Coleman's company hauled out a little bag of silver of about twelve dollars. . . . I grabbed

¹⁶³Sanders, "Bentonville," 299.

¹⁶⁴Ford and Ford, Life in the Confederate Army, 58.

¹⁶⁵Clark, Stars and Bars, 192.

up a frying pan and stuck the handle under my belt as a sort of shield.¹⁶⁶

More than likely the majority of these articles had been stolen from plantations and homes along Sherman's line of march.¹⁶⁷

The wounded and dying lay scattered everywhere. Mercy for the enemy was not the rule of the day; however, an incident occurred with one R. A. Lambert, an infantryman in Baker's Forty-second Alabama Regiment which was an act of kindness. He explained:

On passing a badly wounded Federal soldier, I noticed that he had a good looking canteen, and I took a notion to swap with him but was in so much of a hurry I did not take the time to parley with him on a trade---just simply jerked his off and threw mine down by his side and went on. I afterwards consoled myself with the thought of having done the poor fellow a real favor, as my canteen was full of water, while the one I got was empty.¹⁶⁸

The Thirteenth and Twenty-first Michigan Regiments, aided by artillery, had met with early success in temporarily halting the Confederate attack on General Buell's front. However, when the skirmish lines gave way on their right and left, the entire Union brigade fell back in great disorder.¹⁶⁹ General Taliaferro's columns stretched out much further than Buell's left flank. The Union commander knew that he was outnumbered and, without referring to General Carlin, he ordered

¹⁶⁶Watson, "In the Battle of Bentonville," 95.

¹⁶⁷Samuel A. Ashe, History of North Carolina (Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton Printing Co., 2 volumes, 1925), II, 982, hereinafter cited as Ashe, History of North Carolina.

¹⁶⁸R. A. Lambert, "In the Battle of Bentonville, N.C.," Confederate Veteran, XXXVII (June, 1929), 221; hereinafter cited as Lambert, "In the Battle of Bentonville."

¹⁶⁹Barrett, Sherman's March, 169.

a retreat. He defended his decision with the following explanation:

" . . . my right as far as I could see gave way, and the enemy passed over the works, so that my brigade which still stood, was almost entirely cut off. In this condition with both flanks turned, and no reserve, I concluded that to remain there longer was to sacrifice my brigade."¹⁷⁰

General Buell professed that he was quite surprised that Carlin did not issue a command to fall back before he [Buell] was forced to. Concern for his commander's apparent absent-mindedness was expressed in the following observation: " . . . General Carlin was just at the right of my line, but was evidently not aware of the condition of things to his right, for he was at that time looking intently to the front at the enemy. . . . Half a minute's delay, and General Carlin, myself, and most of my brigade would have been captured."¹⁷¹

Ironically, Carlin became furious because of Buell's hurried retreat.¹⁷²

Yet his account of the situation does not substantiate this. His report stated that he

had gone to the extreme right of Buell's line, and was standing by the last man of the regiment on the right. . . . He acted as if he was nervous. . . . I noticed, however, that the rebel line had advanced very closely to ours at that point . . . and I noticed three soldiers among trees directly in front of the man and myself. Thinking it would steady his nerves, I took his gun . . . and fired it at the group of men just mentioned, who were not over twenty yards from us. I turned to my left, to return the gun. . . . He was still there but there was not another Union soldier of his brigade or any other command in sight. . . .

¹⁷⁰George P. Buell to Capt. J. E. Edmonds, March 25, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 468.

¹⁷¹George P. Buell to Capt. J. E. Edmonds, March 25, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 468.

¹⁷²Carlin, "Bentonville," 241.

I turned to my right and saw the rebel flag flying at the breastworks that had been thrown up by Robinson's brigade, Twentieth Corps. The enemy had advanced all along their line. . . .¹⁷³

Not only did General Carlin neglect to take appropriate actions to protect his division in the face of certain capture, but he came very close to being killed or captured himself because of his lack of perception.

His own detailed description lends validity to this fact:

The enemy had breastworks both on the right and left of my position, and were [sic] not thirty steps from me. . . . There was not an officer, man or horse at my disposal. . . . My first thought was to surrender, as it seemed impossible that I could effect my escape, and almost certain death if it should be attempted. . . . I decided to . . . rejoin my command if I could find them. Stealing to the rear at a walk . . . my conspicuous dress, brought me into full view of the enemy's line in my rear. It was then that a regular fusilade from at least a hundred guns was opened on me, cutting the twigs and bushes all around me, and throwing up black dirt around . . . and under my feet. . . . I noticed some bushes about ten paces in advance of me, and I soon cut off the view of the enemy. . . . A few steps beyond these friendly bushes I was confronted by seven or eight Federal soldiers . . . who told me that . . . [they] had been picking off officers and color bearers. . . . It occurred to me that the Chinese system of noise might deter the rebels for a short time, and check their progress. In accordance . . . I commanded this squad of men to form into a line, and proceeded to give commands in my loudest voice, as if maneuvering a battalion, but . . . the enemy . . . continued to advance regardless of my commands . . . I then directed these young heroes to try to find their regiments in the rear and join them.¹⁷⁴

After walking several hundred yards, General Carlin encountered more Confederate troops, but miraculously he found his way unscathed back behind the newly formed lines of the Twentieth Corps situated close

¹⁷³ Carlin, "Bentonville," 241.

¹⁷⁴ Carlin, "Bentonville," 242-243.

to the Goldsboro road. Here he found Buell's and Hobart's brigades, his staff, and his horse.¹⁷⁵

General Slocum knew at this time that the Union left wing was in great peril of being routed. The commands of Hobart, Buell, and Robinson had been swept from their trenches by the Confederate charge. One participant from the Thirty-third Massachusetts Regiment summed up the enemy's ferocity by stating, "they were determined to carry our position at any sacrifice."¹⁷⁶ Another Union soldier from a New Jersey unit echoed this sentiment in this statement: ". . . the Fourteenth Corps was pressed back and the vast field was soon covered with men, horses, artillery caissons, etc., which brought vividly to our minds a similar scene at Chancellorsville. . . ."¹⁷⁷ One man went on to say that, "the onset was one of the most desperate of the war."¹⁷⁸ The point had been reached where something had to be done quickly to turn the momentum of the battle around. The panicked retreat, according to J. R. Kinnear, a member of the Eighty-sixth Illinois, caused more alarm among the troops than the actual fighting itself. He recalled that

¹⁷⁵ Andrew J. Boies, Record of the Thirty-third Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry from August 1862-August 1865 (Fitchburg: Sentinel Printing Co., 1880), 116, hereinafter cited as Boies, Record of the Thirty-third Massachusetts.

¹⁷⁷ Samuel Toombs, Reminiscences of the War, Experiences of the Thirteenth Regiment New Jersey Volunteers (Orange, N.J.: Journal Office, 1878), 215, hereinafter cited as Toombs, Reminiscences of the War.

¹⁷⁸ Boies, Record of the Thirty-third Massachusetts, 116.

teamsters began to flee to the rear with their teams, and ambulance drivers with their ambulances. Each tried to outrun the rest, for all were eager to be foremost; consequently, in the jumble and excitement that ensued, no headway was made. In trying to head each other off, they stuck fast in the swamp. The drivers did not try to extricate their vehicles, but mounting mules [they] fled for serener sky.¹⁷⁹

In one Federal regiment, a color sergeant became so disgusted with the disorderly panic that he "stuck his colors [flag] in the ground and drawing his sword called upon the men to rally around him and not give up the field, but the crowd surged past him and grasped his colors and went to the rear with them."¹⁸⁰

The Twentieth Corps was being hurried to the front by General Williams, but it could not make enough progress to stem the Confederate onslaught in this first charge.¹⁸¹ Alexander McClurg, a staff officer in Slocum's command, had been sent back down the Goldsboro road to hurry up the advance of reinforcements. As he returned to the battlefront he met a discouraging sight:

Almost immediately I met masses of men . . . doggedly falling back along the road, and through the fields and open woods on the left of the road. They were retreating and with evidently good cause . . . minnie balls were whizzing in every direction, although I was then far from the front line. . . . Pushing on through these . . . men . . . down the road, I met . . . the 19th [sic] Indiana Battery, and was dashing past it when the lieutenant in command called out, "For Heaven's sake, don't go down there! I am the last man of the command. Everything is gone

¹⁷⁹Kinnear, History of the Eighty-Sixth Regiment, 105.

¹⁸⁰Toombs, Reminiscences of the War, 215.

¹⁸¹Henry J. Aten, History of the Eighty-fifth Regiment, Illinois Volunteer Infantry (Hiawatha; Regimental Association, 1901), 289, hereinafter cited as Aten, History of the Eighty-fifth Illinois Regiment.

in front of you. . . . The lieutenant commanding my battery and most of the men and horses are killed. . . . These two guns are all we have left." ¹⁸²

Major McClurg spurred his horse off the road and up a rise toward the sound of heavy fire. The sight which unfolded in front of his eyes confirmed the artilleryman's warning. He described the picture in front of him:

Checking my horse, I saw the rebel regiments in front in full view, stretching through the fields to the left as far as the eye could reach, advancing rapidly, and firing as they came. Everything seemed hopeless on our center and left; but in the swampy woods on the right of the road our line seemed to be holding its position. . . . The onward sweep of the rebel lines was like the waves of the ocean, relentless. ¹⁸³

General Johnston stated in his narrative that the outcome of the charge of Hardee's troops and the Army of Tennessee "was not for five minutes doubtful." ¹⁸⁴ His praise for Hardee was especially strong as he described the commander's role in this assault: "Hardee, after commanding the double-quick, led the charge, and, with his knightly gallantry, dashed over the enemy's breastworks on horseback, in front of his men." ¹⁸⁵ Johnston personally complimented Hardee on the spot saying, "You have done what you always do." ¹⁸⁶ General Hardee was the

¹⁸² McClurg, "Last Chance," 393.

¹⁸³ McClurg, "Last Chance," 393.

¹⁸⁴ Johnston, Narrative of Military Operations, 387.

¹⁸⁵ Johnston, Narrative of Military Operations, 388.

¹⁸⁶ John W. Jones, "William J. Hardee," The South in the Building of a Nation, edited by Julian A. Chandler and others (Richmond: The Southern Historical Publication Society, 13 vols. 1909-1913), XI, 442, hereinafter cited as Jones, "William J. Hardee."

type of leader who exposed himself to danger as an example to engender confidence and to satisfy his own demands of what an army officer should be. However, Hardee was not a general who leaped recklessly over breastworks leading a charging column. The battle of Bentonville was an exception to this rule. The reason might lie in what he saw as a need at this time to bolster the morale of the men he led. Since the summer of 1865, Confederate officers of high rank had found it necessary to personally lead attacks which would have formally been left up to subordinate commanders. Many of the younger, zealous officers had been killed.¹⁸⁷

The Confederate "Stars and Bars" were raised victoriously over Robinson's captured breastworks as rebel cries filled the air. Robinson's new position was located in an open field approximately four hundred yards to the right of the line of the Twentieth Corps.¹⁸⁸ It was not long before the men of General D. H. Hill's command seized upon the chance to capture a section of Lieutenant Webb's Nineteenth Indiana Artillery which was close by. This target proved easy prey for Palmer's Brigade.¹⁸⁹ The scene was described by a member of the Fifty-eighth North Carolina Volunteers. "In running down and taking the guns some of the artillerymen were shot while on the [ammunition] chests, and the old pine field was strewn with blankets, provisions and plunder

¹⁸⁷ Hughes, "William Joseph Hardee," 566.

¹⁸⁸ William Hawley to Capt. E. K. Buttrick, March 26, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 637; J. S. Robinson to Capt. E. K. Buttrick, March 27, 1865, 666; France, Battle of Bentonville Study, March 19, 11.

¹⁸⁹ France, Battle of Bentonville Study, March 19, 12.

of all sorts thrown away by the flying foe."¹⁹⁰ Two of these guns were captured.¹⁹¹

The only section of the Fourteenth Corps which remained intact after the initial Confederate charge was General Morgan's Division which was situated south of the Goldsboro road. If the Union army was to remain on the field as a viable force until Sherman could return with the right wing, this division would have to hold. This was one of the most critical points in the battle. The Confederate right, flushed with success, could continue to roll up the Union line. General Morgan's left flank lay exposed and only one other organized Union division remained within supporting distance--a mile west down the road.¹⁹²

The only thing which prevented the gray lines from continuing their assault south of the Goldsboro road was the confusion which reigned among General Hill's scattered ranks and the dense and tangled thickets which had caused General Hardee's troops to become disengaged at many points. General Johnston ordered that the lines be reestablished and organization restored before further offensive movements were undertaken.¹⁹³ This command was given at approximately 3:45 P.M.

¹⁹⁰ Clark, Histories of the North Carolina Regiments, III, K 440.

¹⁹¹ Aubrey Lee Brooks and Hugh Talmadge Lefler (eds.), The Papers of Walter Clark (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2 volumes, 1857-1961), I, 136, hereinafter cited as Brooks and Lefler, Walter Clark Papers; Boies, Record of the Thirty-third Massachusetts.

¹⁹² Hughes, "William Joseph Hardee," 557.

¹⁹³ Report of Major Carter L. Stevenson, March 30, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 1094; Johnston, Narrative of Military Operations, 388.

Since the charge had commenced, the Confederate army had advanced almost one mile.¹⁹⁴

The newly established Confederate line now extended approximately a mile west of the Cole House and ran roughly parallel and north of the Goldsboro road. Brigadier General J. B. Palmer had crossed this road with a detachment of his troops before Johnston had issued the command to regroup. Therefore, D. H. Hill subsequently ordered him to return to the newly designated Confederate lines.¹⁹⁵ The difficulties in aligning the divisions of the Army of Tennessee at this point was described by a combatant present. "The Army of Tennessee was on the left and Taliaferro was on the right. Coherence had almost been completely lost and units mixed indiscriminately due to the nature of the ground and the confusion and smoke of battle."¹⁹⁶ It became necessary to make a change in several units to shore up weaknesses in the lines. Walthall's and Loring's Divisions were moved several hundred yards further to the extreme right flank.¹⁹⁷

After some semblance of order had been restored, Generals Bate and Taliaferro shifted their troops toward the west and advanced parallel to the Goldsboro road to pursue the remainder of Carlin's Division. The divisions of Hardee's men renewed the attack on Morgan's

¹⁹⁴Report of Maj. Gen. Edward C. Walthall to Maj. R. W. Millsaps, April 8, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 1102.

¹⁹⁵Report of Brig. Gen. Joseph Palmer to Major John Reeve, March 29, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 1100.

¹⁹⁶France, Battle of Bentonville Study, March 19, 13.

¹⁹⁷Beach, "Battle of Bentonville," 28.

Division south of the Goldsboro road.¹⁹⁸ This Confederate advance soon encountered the enemy and heavy fighting commenced. General Fitch's command was soon outflanked and forced to withdraw south into a swamp; out of action for the remainder of the day. It was not long before Colonel Miles' brigade, which was entrenched to the right of Fitch, gave way. This Federal unit also withdrew back toward the southeast and was not able to assist in further defensive movements that day.¹⁹⁹

The brigades of Mitchell and Vandever were all that remained on the Union front lines. General Benjamin Fearing's brigade was held in reserve. Another critical point in this battle was at hand. General Davis, commander of the Fourteenth Corps, had up until that point prevented a complete rout of his troops. However, he was then very aware of his perilous situation. Colonel McClurg later recalled General Davis's plan of action to counterattack and save his corps:

When the left first began to give way, General Davis sent Colonel Litchfield to Fearing, with instructions to hold his brigade in readiness to march in any direction. A few moments later, when . . . the rebel line was sweeping after them in hot pursuit, General Davis came plunging through the swamp on his fiery white mare toward the reserve. "Where is that brigade, Litchfield?" "Here it is, sir, ready to march." . . . Ordering it swung around to the left, General Davis shouted, "Advance upon their flank, Fearing! Deploy as you go! Strike them wherever you find them! Give them the best you've got and we'll whip them yet!"²⁰⁰

With renewed invigoration from General Davis's exhilarating appearance, officers and men from General Fearing's brigade cried ". . . we'll whip

¹⁹⁸Hughes, "William Joseph Hardee," 557.

¹⁹⁹France, Battle of Bentonville Study, March 19, 13.

²⁰⁰McClurg, "Last Chance," 393-394.

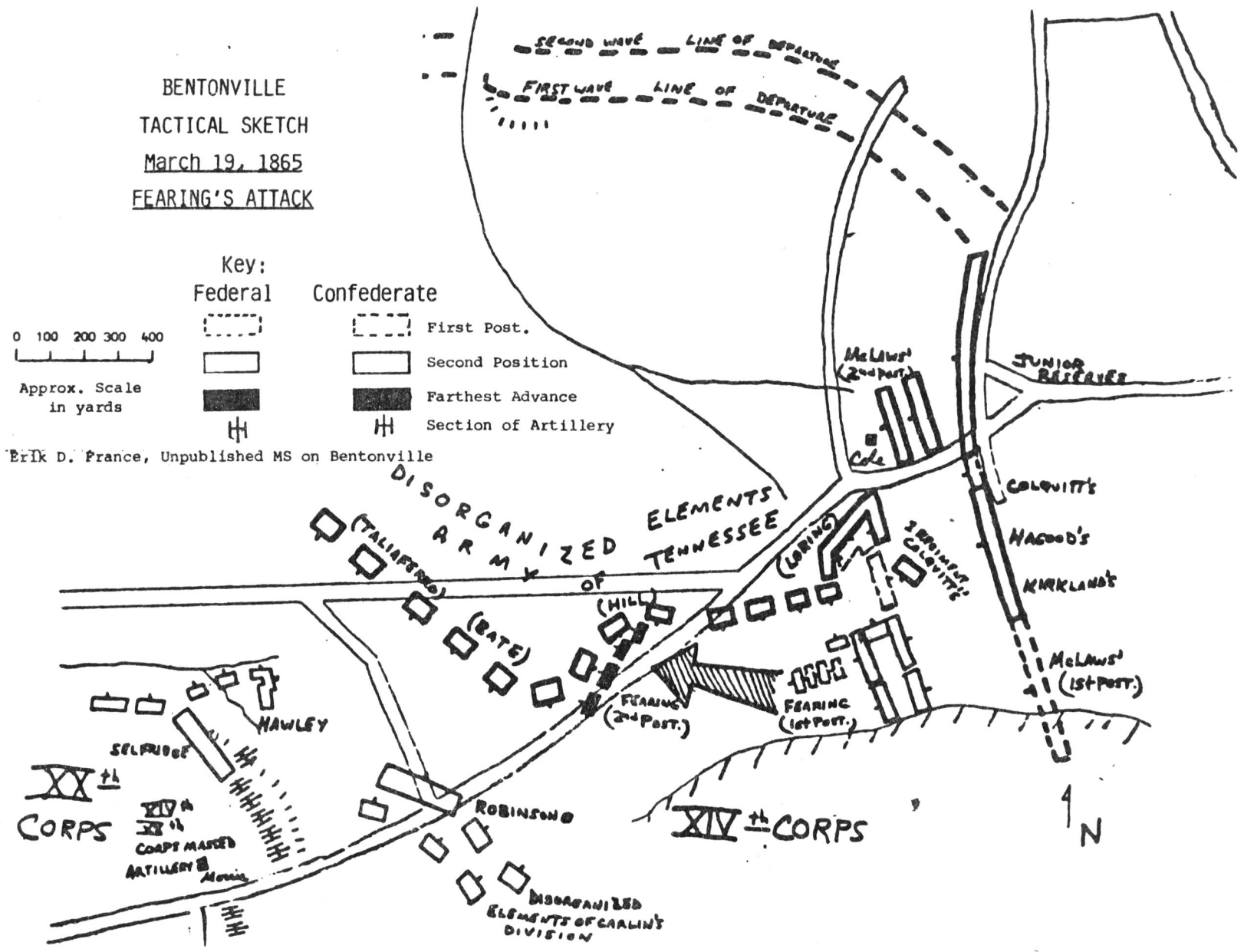
BENTONVILLE
TACTICAL SKETCH
March 19, 1865
FEARING'S ATTACK

Key:

Federal	Confederate
	First Post.
	Second Position
	Farthest Advance
	Section of Artillery

0 100 200 300 400
Approx. Scale in yards

Erk D. France, Unpublished MS on Bentonville



them yet!!" They marched off through the thick woods to engage the waiting Confederate troops.²⁰¹ They soon struck the left of S. D. Lee's Corps about thirty paces south of the Goldsboro road.²⁰² The scene of conflict was a densely wooded swamp. The determined Union brigade delivered a stunning blow to the unsuspecting Confederates,²⁰³ who were staggered and temporarily paralyzed. Reeling from this attack, elements of Lee's and Stewart's Corps massed for a counterattack upon Fearing's right, which overlapped their own. One Union officer explained this precarious situation: "Pettus charged front to the rear upon his right and Baker came up hurriedly to his assistance, but in doing so, threw his brigade across Palmer's, cutting it in two. Walthall also placed his troops and a portion of Dea's brigade upon Pettus's left and Loring also brought his troops in. . . ."²⁰⁴ This concentration of Confederate troops on Fearing's right greatly endangered his position. Therefore, he commanded his men to fall back to a position some two hundred and fifty yards to the right of General James Robinson's Brigade. This placed Fearing completely out of touch with General Mitchell's Brigade. However, his bold attack had dealt the "Johnnies" a crippling blow. It had been accomplished by a loss of half of his men.²⁰⁵ Fearing himself was wounded as he withdrew his battered troops southwest towards

²⁰¹ McClurg, "Last Chance," 394.

²⁰² Beach, "Battle of Bentonville," 28.

²⁰³ Aten, History of the Eighty-Fifth Illinois Regiment, 290; Lossing, Pictorial History, III, 501.

²⁰⁴ Beach, "Battle of Bentonville," 28.

²⁰⁵ Beach, "Battle of Bentonville," 28.

the Morris House where his command would remain out of action. Fearing's charge was described as a "magnificent display of courage, discipline, and enthusiasm."²⁰⁶ This decisive check made by General Fearing proved of infinite value to Sherman's army because it afforded time for the reorganization of the left and center of General Davis's line. It was drawn back and formed in open fields, half a mile to the rear of the old line of defense.²⁰⁷

Sometime around 4:00 P.M., General Bragg managed to make an assault on the entrenched Union troops in his front. He had failed to join in on the successful Confederate charge earlier in the afternoon when he had been instructed to move his troops in flank from right to left. Apparently, Bragg had misunderstood these orders handed down by General Johnston or he just failed to carry them out. To make matters worse, General Lafayette McLaws' Division, whom Bragg had received as reinforcements earlier, had wandered about the battlefield without any apparent purpose since two o'clock that afternoon.²⁰⁸ Believing the attack to be over later in the day, McLaws ordered his men to collect the ammunition and arms lying scattered about the field.²⁰⁹

In General Bragg's assault, General Hoke sent Hagood's and Colquitt's Brigades forward not only to engage the enemy but to reestablish

²⁰⁶ Lossing, Pictorial History, III, 501.

²⁰⁷ Lossing, Pictorial History, III, 501.

²⁰⁸ Hughes, "William Joseph Hardee," 554-555.

²⁰⁹ McLaws Order Book, March 19 entry.

communications with General Hardee's command.²¹⁰ Hagood was positioned on the left flank and Colquitt on the right. One of Colquitt's regiments had previously participated in the defeat of Fitch's and Miles' troops. This same Confederate regiment began pouring an enfilade fire into General Mitchell's left flank as Hagood's and Colquitt's troops succeeded in moving into a flanking position.²¹¹ Before this mission was completed, however, General Bragg, ordered an all-out frontal attack. Thus, these troops were forced to reestablish their ranks to prepare for the new charge. The Confederate brigades advanced in the following formation: General Hagood's Brigade was positioned in the center. Taylor was on the right of the brigade connecting with Colquitt, and Rion was on the left.²¹²

The struggle which ensued between the blue and gray columns can only be called chaos. Lieutenant Colonel John D. Taylor, who commanded the Thirty-sixth North Carolina troops, whose ranks were made up almost completely of artillerymen from the former coastal defenses around Wilmington, best described the action:

In front of our line the enemy had four lines of breastworks, and . . . my command was situated between two branches which narrowed as they converged on the enemy's position. On the right and left of me were other commands . . . which for some reason did not advance in the general movement. I carried my command to the first breastwork and charged the enemy out, but the failure of the commands on either side of me to move forward enabled the enemy to enfilade my lines, resulting in a terrible mortality. . . .²¹³

²¹⁰ Hagood, Memoirs, 360.

²¹¹ France, Battle of Bentonville Study, March 19, 14.

²¹² Hagood, Memoirs, 360.

²¹³ John D. Taylor, 8-9, unpublished diary in the possession of N. E. Rivenbark, Wilmington, hereinafter cited as Taylor Diary.

Taylor's regiment received the brunt of the casualties in this deadly charge. In fact, Colonel Taylor was severely wounded and lost his arm in this engagement. The total count of Taylor's injured and killed was 152 out of a total of 267 men. This was a casualty rate of 57 per cent.²¹⁴ Every officer was killed, wounded, or captured, but two. One of the participants conveyed some opinions which he overheard after that particular charge: "Officers who had served in the Army of Northern Virginia said it was the hottest infantry fight they had ever been in except Cold Harbor."²¹⁵

Hotly contested fighting continued after Bragg's engagement below the Goldsboro road. Remnants from General Carlin's Union division rallied together with men from General James Morgan's division on his left flank. They had to sustain a very determined attack from Confederate General D. H. Hill's troops. The Federals were completely cut off from any reinforcements and entirely surrounded in low swampy woods.²¹⁶ However, they did have one great advantage. The sturdy log and earthen breastworks which General Mitchell and other Union commanders had ordered to be built earlier in the day served as a formidable defensive wall. One Union officer in Morgan's command expressed confidence in their fortifications, even in the face of overwhelming numbers.

²¹⁴ Alfred M. Waddell, The Last Year of the War in North Carolina, Including Plymouth, Fort Fisher, and Bentonville, An Address Before the Association Army of Northern Virginia (Richmond: William Ellis Jones, 1888), 28, hereinafter cited as Waddell, Last Year of the War; Beach, "Battle of Bentonville," 29.

²¹⁵ Clark, Histories of the North Carolina Regiments, II, 651.

²¹⁶ Lossing, Pictorial History, III, 501.

". . . they [Union forces] had often attacked works, but they had rarely had the pleasure of fighting behind them themselves, and they rather enjoyed the prospect."²¹⁷ The fighting raged on as units from each side tried to outflank the other. At some point, several Confederate brigades from D. H. Hill's command were able to swing around so that they were positioned in General Morgan's rear.²¹⁸ R. A. Lambert, a member of the Forty-Second Alabama Regiment, explained what happened at that point:

The outcome of the situation here was that in a very short while, without any great deal of shooting from either side, the next charge came from the blue jackets, who began to wave hats and handkerchiefs over their works, so it was natural for us to suppose they were wanting to surrender, for we knew full well that we were in behind them; therefore, we rose up, and told them to come over, and they in turn told us to come over, and thus we found there was a misunderstanding, so each line dropped back into a comparatively safe position for a short time, and the same thing took place for a second time. . . . The next turn of the situation was that our line on the extreme right (the end of it being only about fifty yards from me) began to give way. . . . I debated whether to be captured or to take my chance of being shot in the back. . . . I took my chances and [while] hurrying back. . . . I saw a line of Yanks. . . . The woods looked blue with them.²¹⁹

Some of General Hill's troops had managed to gain possession of some unoccupied logworks which had been built earlier in the day by a Union brigade in Carlin's Division. They made a demand for the surrender of General William Vandevere and his men because they too had managed to work around to his rear. This time, however, a cunning maneuver was made whereby the Union troops made an about face and jumped

²¹⁷ McClurg, "Last Chance," 395.

²¹⁸ France, Battle of Bentonville Study, March 19, 15.

²¹⁹ Lambert, "In the Battle of Bentonville," 221-222.

over their works. They immediately began firing into what had just been their rear. This surprise move, combined with the arrival of the Seventeenth New York Regiment, threw the Confederate attackers completely off guard. Several heavy volleys of shot were poured into their ranks and were followed up by a bayonet charge participated in by General Morgan's entire Union division. The terrain was thickly wooded and heavy hand-to-hand fighting took place.²²⁰ To make matters worse for the Confederates, General Cogswell arrived with his troops from the Twentieth Corps. This was at approximately 5 o'clock P.M. He had received orders from General Slocum to proceed to the front and right, and to fill the gap between the brigades of Fearing and Mitchell. These troops were exhausted after having marched all of the preceding night and all of that day. They had managed to cover the last seven miles at double-quick after being told of the beating their comrades in the Fourteenth Corps were receiving.

The swampy forest was not ideal ground for the deployment of an entire division of troops, but nevertheless Cogswell formed his troops into two lines and advanced.²²¹ A Confederate infantryman in Baker's Brigade gave a vivid description of their predicament with the arrival of Union reinforcements:

²²⁰Beach, "Battle of Bentonville," 29; James D. Morgan To Lt. Col. A. C. McClurg, March 29, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 485-486; Wm. Vandever to Capt. T. Wiseman, March 31, 1865, 496-497; Barrett, Sherman's March, 173; Luvaas, "Bentonville," 345-346.

²²¹Hartwell Osborn and others, Trials and Triumphs. The Record of the Fifty-fifth Ohio Volunteer Infantry (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1904), 29, hereinafter cited as Osborn, Trials and Triumphs.

. . . we found ourselves (in military parlance) in a hollow square, the enemy on four sides of us in heavy timber, and each line close by at that! In this position at the very close of the day, we lost, I feel sure . . . a third of our men in killed and prisoners, mostly prisoners. Our men who got out were either those who hid themselves in the thick gallberry bushes until after dark or those flat of foot. I was in the latter class, and I am not ashamed to own up to such on that particular occasion.²²²

General Davis had sat on his horse behind the front lines listening to the "incessant roar of musketry" for a half an hour. He could do nothing but let Generals Morgan and Cogwell's men fight it out with the Confederate troops.²²³ One participant on the scene recalled the ferocity of this rifle fire: "Seldom have I heard such continuous and remorseless roar of musketry. It seemed more than the men could bear. . . . Soldiers in the command who have passed through scores of battles will tell you they never saw anything like the fighting at Bentonville."²²⁴ At one point General Davis reportedly became so alarmed by the fire that he turned to a staff member, Colonel McClurg and said, "If Morgan's troops can stand this, all is right, if not the day is lost."²²⁵

An infantryman in the Eighty-Fifth Illinois Regiment recalled proudly that in this particular encounter he and his comrades ". . . seemed to feel that upon them devolved the desperate honor of stemming the tide of defeat and turning it into victory. . . ."²²⁶

²²²Lambert, "In the Battle of Bentonville," 222.

²²³McClurg, "Last Chance," 395.

²²⁴Lossing, Pictorial History, III, 501.

²²⁵Lossing, Pictorial History, III, 501.

²²⁶Aten, History of the Eighty-Fifth Illinois Regiment, 290.

The tide turned in favor of the Union troops and Generals Stevenson and Walthall's divisions were driven back to the Goldsboro road. The colors of the Fortieth North Carolina and the Fifty-fourth Virginia were captured and many prisoners were taken by the Union thrust which was flushed with victory. Fierce fighting continued between the two sides until approximately 8 P.M.²²⁷ However, the outcome of this pitched struggle had been decided when General Cogswell arrived on the scene with reinforcements. Union success on this part of the battlefield, south of the Goldsboro road, probably was the turning point in the battle. The rout of the entire Fourteenth Corps had been prevented and precious time had been given for the Twentieth Corps to reach the battlefield.²²⁸

At this point, the Confederate left flank had been virtually neutralized. Therefore, General Johnston turned his attention to General Hardee's troops to renew the attack. Night was closing in and there was time for one last assault to be made on the Twentieth Corps. Reinforcements were needed badly on the right flank because of the exhausted condition of Taliaferro's and Bates' Corps. They had taken part in spirited fighting against the left and center of the Union positions and by 5:00 P.M. they were too tired to continue fighting. Thus, General Hardee ordered General McLaws to bring his division around to

²²⁷ Beach, "Battle of Bentonville," 29; Aten, History of the Eighty-Fifth Illinois Regiment, 294.

²²⁸ Luvaas, "Bentonville," 346.

provide this badly needed support. This movement was begun and Generals Johnston, Stewart, and Bragg quickly talked of a plan of attack on the Twentieth Corps.²²⁹

While the remnants of the Fourteenth Corps had been locked in combat below the Goldsboro road, General Alpheus Williams had been busily fortifying his Twentieth Corps for what he believed would be a renewal of Confederate hostilities. The Union columns had been arriving all afternoon and they were given directions for deployment to facilitate the best defense possible under prevailing conditions. Robinson's Division had been the first to arrive and it took up positions on the Morris Farm about a mile southwest of the Cole House. The chosen location was situated on rising ground covered with pines, with a marsh in front.²³⁰ The Third Brigade of Robinson's division connected with General Ben Fearing's left flank and General Carlin's right. Carlin had managed to reassemble a considerable part of his division which had been routed earlier in the afternoon. The artillery from the Fourteenth Corps which had not been captured was combined with that of the Twentieth Corps. Colonel William Hawley's was positioned in the rear of General Carlin's Fourteenth Corps to prevent a flank attack. Colonel James Selfridge's Brigade was instructed to entrench between the Goldsboro road and the artillery placements to serve as a reserve unit.

²²⁹McLaws Order Book, March 19 entry; France, Battle of Bentonville Study, March 19, 15.

²³⁰Force, "Marching Across Carolina," 144.

Since the artillery had to be relied on heavily in a Confederate frontal attack, some sixteen guns were massed on a ridge where they commanded a full view of the open fields in front. Robinson's and Hawley's Brigades were placed on either side of these guns.²³¹

To the complete surprise of the Federal commanders involved in preparing their defenses, a full hour elapsed before the first wave of Confederate troops appeared. This allowed just enough time for hasty entrenchments to be thrown up for the troops. A Union private in the Twentieth Corps described how these defenses were constructed:

During this time, the boys in the line worked with spades and axes like beavers. The rear line would work a few minutes just as hard as they could. Then the front line changed places with them. In a little while, they had a splendid set of works built. . . . In two hours, we had marched eight miles and put up five breastworks. . . .²³²

General Williams decided his best plan of defense would be to lure a Confederate charge into a four hundred yard gap between Hawley's and Robinson's Brigades. The artillery could sweep the open fields as the "Johnnies" approached. They were entrapped when they reached the ravine in front of the rise.²³³

²³¹ Edwin E. Bryant, History of the Third Regiment of Wisconsin Veteran Volunteer Infantry, 1861-1865 (Madison: Veterans Association of the Regiment, 1891), 323, hereinafter cited as Bryant, History of The Third Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry; Jacob D. Cox, The March to the Sea. Franklin and Nashville (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1882), 192, hereinafter cited as Cox, March to the Sea; A. S. Williams to Maj. R. P. Dechert, March 31, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 587.

²³² Strong, Yankee Private, 192-193.

²³³ Luvaas, "Bentonville," 347; Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 587.

Sometime just after 5 o'clock, General Hardee ordered that the attack begin. The sun was low in the sky as three long lines of gray-clad men emerged from the pine woods and thickets and moved out into the open fields.²³⁴ The rebels advanced just as General Williams had hoped they would. The Union lines waited until just the right time to bring the full force of their firepower to bear on the Confederate ranks. It was a "do or die" situation as one account recalled:

. . . every man was placed on the firing line—even the headquarters guard and the small detachment guarding the ammunition train filled a gap in the extended line. No further reinforcements could be hoped for that day, and there was nothing left but for the men to fight it out.²³⁵

And fight it out they would. The first assault wave of Confederate troops was fierce. General Carlin's Division was immediately crowded back once again. Colonel Hawley sent the Thirteenth New Jersey across the ravine to the right of the Union lines, where it would be more effective. In this rush, General Williams ordered that the artillery be double-shotted. Bullets were wrapped in rags and stuffed into the guns on top of the shells. Entire boxes of cartridges were fired in some volleys.²³⁶ A great volume of shot and shell was needed for reloading as one account described the hectic attempt to keep up the barrage of fire: ". . . wagon-load after wagon load of ammunition . . . [was]

²³⁴ McClurg, "Last Chance," 394; Toombs, Reminiscences of the War, 215.

²³⁵ Aten, History of the Eighty-Fifth Illinois Regiment, 294.

²³⁶ Bryant, History of the Third Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry, 323; Charles S. Brown to his family, April 18, 1865, D.U.M.C.

hurried across the vast open field to the edge of the woods that marked our lines."²³⁷

The Confederate troops were just as determined to overrun the enemy works as the Union defenders were to stop their foe. Several successive charges were made in an attempt to separate Robinson's and Hawley's Divisions. One Union account recalled the sheer determination and boldness with which the gray lines surged forward: "The onset was one of the most desperate of the war. Column followed column in succession . . . to carry our position at any cost."²³⁸ The outcome, however, was decided by the deadly concentrated fire from the Union artillery which devastated the Confederate lines. Private Robert Sanders, present in the charge by General Taliaferro's Division, reported the bloody scene:

In approaching their battery (or batteries) of artillery, about half of our regiment on the right had come out into the open, in a field where there was nothing to conceal or protect them. Our men fell rapidly, killed and wounded, until some were forced to withdraw from the old field. The enemy's guns, cannons, and rifles, were immediately turned upon our left wing, and soon, under what seemed a tremendous concentrated fire upon us, orders were given to "fall back" to a re-formed line in the woods in our rear. . . .²³⁹

General Taliaferro's troops had charged so near to the Union gun positions that ". . . he [Taliaferro] ordered the second line of men to lie down, then had the colors lowered until all that showed above

²³⁷George S. Bradley, The Star Corps: or, Notes of an Army Chaplain During Sherman's Famous March to the Sea (Milwaukee: Jermain and Brightman, 1865), 273, hereinafter cited as Bradley, Notes of an Army Chaplain.

²³⁸Boies, Record of the Thirty-third Massachusetts, 116.

²³⁹Sanders, "Bentonville," 291.

ground were General Taliaferro, Capt. Fraser Matthews, Capt. William Perrin Kemp, and one boy, all still mounted, while the tree tops were actually falling around us."²⁴⁰ The officers dismounted but the boy of sixteen did not. General Taliaferro reportedly admonished to the boy saying, "It is foolish to sit there."²⁴¹ Just as the boy thanked him and dismounted, a grapeshot dashed over the saddle and buried itself at his feet. No man was safe from the remorseless roar of the double-shotted Union cannons. One Confederate soldier remarked that, "... the raging leaden hailstorm of grape and cannister literally barked the trees, cutting off the limbs as if cut by hand."²⁴²

As the sun receded behind the pine ridges, three brigades from General McLaws' Division unsuccessfully attacked General Mitchell's entrenched brigade. A member of the Thirty-third Massachusetts Volunteers who witnessed this determined Confederate charge related that So close and murderous was this combat, that piles of "Rebs" lay dead within our lines and around the general's headquarters [Williams]. For the time it lasted it was one of the hardest battles of the war. . . . No better fighting was seen during the war than at Bentonville [sic] on the 19th of March, 1865. . . .²⁴³

²⁴⁰ Samuel Ravenal, "The Boy Brigade of South Carolina," Confederate Veteran, XXIX (November-December, 1921), 417, hereinafter cited as Ravenal, "Boy Brigade of South Carolina."

²⁴¹ Samuel Ravenal, "Ask the Survivors of Bentonville," Confederate Veteran, XVIII (March, 1910), 124, hereinafter cited as Ravenal, "Ask the Survivors."

²⁴² Ravenal, "Boy Brigade of South Carolina," 124.

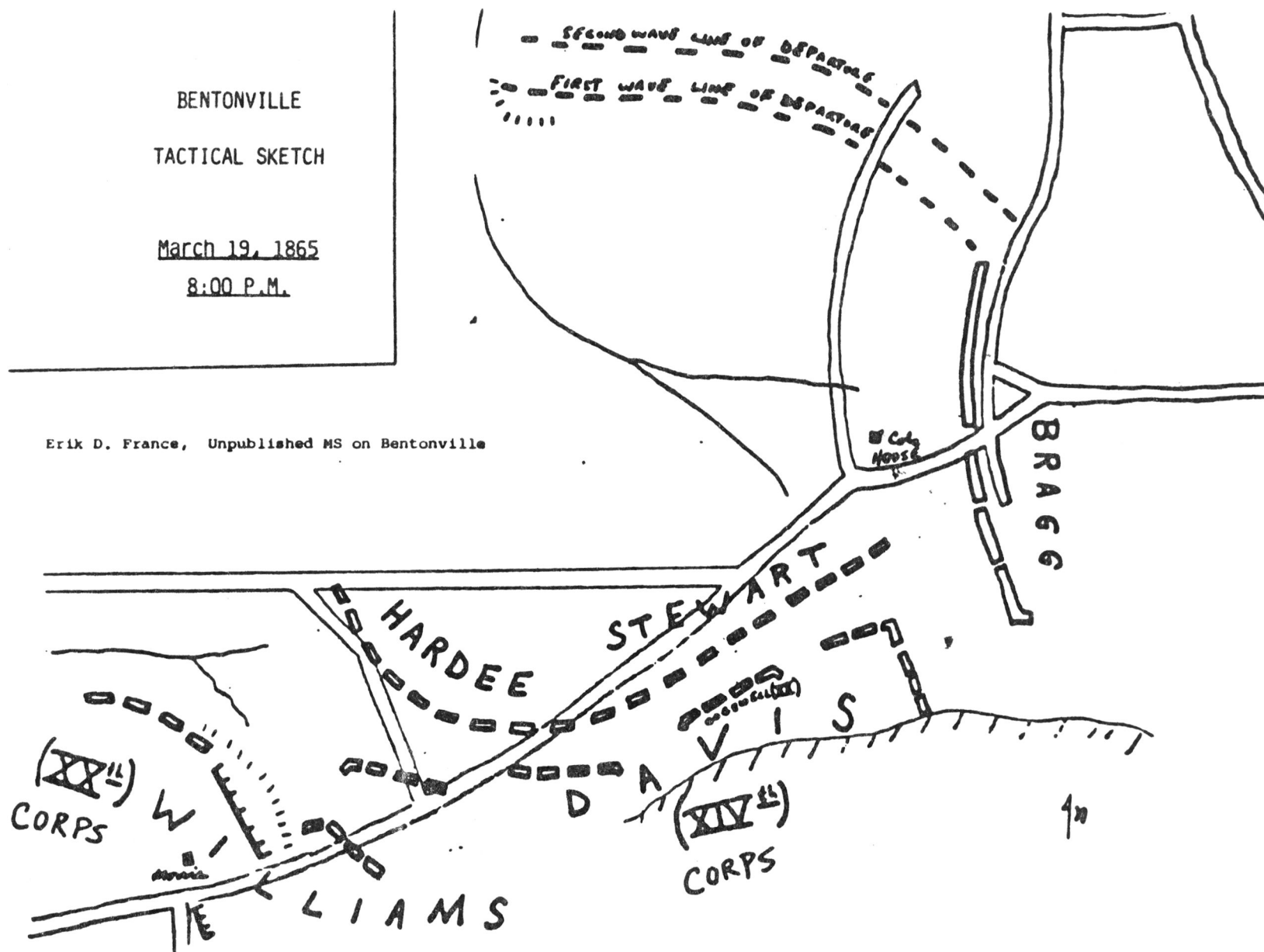
²⁴³ Boies, Record of the Thirty-Third Massachusetts, 116.

BENTONVILLE
TACTICAL SKETCH

March 19, 1865

8:00 P.M.

Erik D. France, Unpublished MS on Bentonville



One Confederate combatant from a North Carolina Regiment concurred entirely with the sentiments of the Massachusetts trooper. One Sergeant Devant who had fought in many of the largest battles with General Lee's Army of Northern Virginia remarked: "If there was a place in the battle of Gettysburg as hot as that spot, I never saw it."²⁴⁴

The entire series of Confederate charges had been repulsed by the Union defenders as darkness set in. The battered gray lines withdrew back into the woods out of range of the deadly artillery. These troops had tried desperately to drive a wedge between the Federal positions. One captured Union infantryman told an officer in Elliot's Brigade, "if the Confederates had only held their positions, or gone forward for just a few minutes more. . . . For . . . we were nearly out of ammunition and would have been compelled to flee."²⁴⁵

The Union artillery slowed up considerably; however, the combination of the incessant use of them all day and the firing of thousands of muskets caused ". . . smoke to settle heavy and dense over the country. . . ."²⁴⁶ In addition to these problems, fog settled in and one soldier's account recalled that ". . . it added to the smoke [and] made it impossible to see but a very short distance."²⁴⁷ General D. H. Hill gave a good description of the battlefield as darkness set in:

²⁴⁴Ravenel, "Ask the Survivors," 124.

²⁴⁵Sanders, "Bentonville," 299.

²⁴⁶McLaws Order Book, March 19 entry.

²⁴⁷McLaws Order Book, March 19 entry.

There had been a good deal of confusion after reaching the Goldsboro road, owing to the mixture of troops and to orders being issued by different commanders . . . but after nightfall, was much increased by the smoke of battle and from thousands of smouldering pine stumps and logs; it was greater than I had ever seen before.²⁴⁸

General Johnston's orders for that night called for his troops to occupy their original breastworks constructed that morning.²⁴⁹ At Confederate headquarters, the corps commanders recounted the gains and losses incurred by their respective units during the day. All agreed that the one main reason for the great loss of life during the last series of assaults on the Twentieth Corps was the need of more time to advance properly. General Bate related that if he had received General McLaws' reinforcements an hour earlier, when he had called for them, chances of Confederate success would have been much enhanced.²⁵⁰

The dead and wounded were removed from the battlefield late into the night as intermittent cannonfire continued. Some of the injured could not be reached and subsequently died where they fell.²⁵¹ Many of the living could not have felt more like death as one infantryman recalled: "Never was the coming of darkness more welcomed to weary soldiers."²⁵² Another Confederate trooper depicted a scene which could only be felt by one who was present on the dark battlefield:

Here could be seen what civilians consider a phenomenon--men sleeping on a battle-field [sic] actually under fire. . . . Some of the men,

²⁴⁸D. H. Hill to Capt. W. D. Gale, March 31, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 1091.

²⁴⁹Beach, "Battle of Bentonville," 30.

²⁵⁰Barrett, Sherman's March, 175.

²⁵¹Ford, "Last Battles," 142.

worn by fatigue, while lying down in line actually went to sleep . . . indifferent to the shells that were tearing through the trees, bursting over their heads, and occasionally causing casualties. During these few hours it was pitiable to hear the groans and cries of the wounded men in our front.²⁵³

Sometime around midnight, Colonel "Wash" Hardy led his Fiftieth North Carolina Regiment, Seventy-seventh Senior Reserves, and the Tenth North Carolina Battalion set out on a night attack. They had not seen much action earlier in the day and saw this as a chance to attack under the cover of darkness. Confederate and Union lines practically intermixed because of the confusion during the day. General Mitchell had ordered camp to be set up and pickets posted quickly so his exhausted troops could rest after the harrowing combat of that day. Suddenly, a young officer appeared out of the darkness and walked right into camp, dressed in a new Confederate uniform. He saluted and said, "Sir, Colonel Hardee [Hardy] presents his compliments to you, and asks that you will appraise your line and that he is forming in your front to charge the Yankee lines on your left."²⁵⁵ General Mitchell immediately ascertained that this officer was a Confederate aide who had lost his way in the darkness. The general asked the confused man if he had eaten supper and he replied that he had not. He was politely escorted by a Union staff officer to the rear where prisoners were being held. General Mitchell could not believe his good fortune and immediately issued

²⁵³Ford, "Last Battles," 142.

²⁵⁴France, Battle of Bentonville Study, March 19, 13; McClurg, "Last Chance," 397.

²⁵⁵McClurg, "Last Chance," 397.

orders for the pickets to draw in and also said that at the tap of the drum, his troops fire one volley from their line. The Union troops stepped quietly into formation and in a short time talking was heard in their front. Hardy's troops had advanced to within twenty feet of what they believed to be another Confederate camp. One loud tap of the drum was heard and then a sheet of fire burst from the muskets.²⁵⁶ The result was best described by General Mitchell: "I never expect to hear again such a volume of mingled cries, groans, screams, and curses. The next morning there was displayed in front of our works, among the dead, a line of new Enfield rifles and knapsacks, almost as straight as if laid out for Sunday morning inspection."²⁵⁷ Colonel Hardy's officers reported the next day that they assumed they had stumbled into just another Confederate camp and were mistakenly shot by their own men. The survivors had retreated across a pond and through some woods, all the while screaming, "You are shooting your own men."²⁵⁸ This Confederate night attack had proven to be an extremely costly mistake. In a mere thirty seconds, Hardy had lost fifty-one men out of a total of 300 troops.²⁵⁹

This incident ended the fighting on the 19th. Both sides further entrenched themselves in anticipation of more hostilities the next day. A few changes were made along the Confederate lines during the night.

²⁵⁶ Osborn, Trials and Triumphs, 202; McClurg, "Last Chance," 397.

²⁵⁷ McClurg, "Last Chance," 397.

²⁵⁸ Clark, Histories of the North Carolina Regiments, IV, 104.

²⁵⁹ Clark, Histories of the North Carolina Regiments, IV, 104.

General McLaws' Division was shifted to the extreme right flank. This new position extended General Taliaferro's earthworks toward the northwest. Also, Confederate skirmishers occupied the captured Federal earthworks built by Robinson's and Carlin's troops that day.²⁶⁰

In assessing the results of March 19, it can be said that a stalemate had occurred between the two sides. General Johnston's army had succeeded in capturing four pieces of artillery, but due to the lack of harnessed horses, only three had been brought back to Confederate lines.²⁶¹ Psychologically, the day had been one of elation for the men in gray. Confidence had been restored in the troops, especially the Army of Tennessee, whose honor had been trod on in the defeat at the battle of Nashville. General Hoke's North Carolinians were also filled with a sense of accomplishment after their recent defeats in the battles of Fort Fisher and Southwest Creek. However, the prevailing consequence was the inability of Johnston to crush Slocum's left wing. The determined Confederate spearheads throughout the day had almost routed the Fourteenth Corps but because of various complications of terrain and leadership, the desired result was never accomplished.

Ironically, overall troop strength between opposing sides had been virtually even. The Union army had approximately 16,127 men on

²⁶⁰ D. H. Hill to Capt. W. D. Gale, March 31, 1865; C. L. Stevenson to J. W. Ratchford, March 30, 1865; Edmund W. Pettus to Maj. J. J. Reeve, April 1, 1865. Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 1091, 1095, 1099; McLaws Order Book, March 19 entry; France, Battle of Bentonville Study, March 19, 22.

²⁶¹ Johnston, Narrative of Military Operations, 389.

hand to fight. This was matched against 16,895 Confederate troops.²⁶² Both sides had sustained heavy losses, especially in the late afternoon and evening hours.

General Johnston felt his only alternative that night was to tend to his many wounded and bolster his defenses in the hope of crippling what he felt would be a numerically superior army the next day.²⁶³

²⁶²Thomas L. Livermore, Numbers and Losses in the Civil War in America, 1861-1865 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1901), 134-135, hereinafter cited as Livermore, Numbers and Losses in the Civil War.

²⁶³J. E. Johnston to General R. E. Lee, March 27, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 1056-1057.

SECOND DAY OF BATTLE: MARCH 20

The sound of artillery fire had been very audible all during the afternoon and evening of March 19 as General Howard continued to steadily move away from General Slocum's embattled left wing. General Sherman remained steadfast in his belief that Slocum was dealing with nothing more than a recalcitrant unit of Confederate cavalry. Several dispatch riders, the first of which had reached General Sherman while he was riding to join Howard's wing, had assured him that General Slocum was succeeding in driving the enemy east down the Goldsboro road. Sherman's position upon receiving the first message was approximately six miles south of the scene of battle.¹

By late in the afternoon of the 19th, Sherman and his personal staff had overtaken General Howard's column near Falling Creek Church. This rendezvous took place just three miles south of Cox's Bridge on the Neuse River. Less than a mile north of this church was located the intersection of the old Goldsboro road at which point General Slocum was supposed to have met the right wing that evening.²

Many of the officers in General Howard's command had listened to the distant sound of artillery with anxiety as the right wing drew closer to Goldsboro. One of these men explained:

¹Sherman, Official Account, 103.

²John A. Logan to Capt. A. M. Van Dyke, March 31, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 234; Cox, March to the Sea, 194.

For a time the general [Howard] and most of the staff thought it was nothing more than a spirited cavalry engagement; but . . . as the heavy rumbling of the guns increased, all shook their heads . . . satisfied that the artillery fire we heard indicated heavy battle . . . which was indicative to us of a fierce and desperate struggle between the left wing and Johnston's army; and as hour after hour passed, and no word came, our anxiety increased.³

Many of General Howard's officers voiced surprise in Sherman's insistence on a fast paced march, which only served to widen the gap between the two wings.⁴ In fact, several division commanders requested permission to head their troops toward the sound of battle. Still undaunted, however, General Sherman ordered the columns to push on. General Kilpatrick's last reconnaissance had assured him that Johnston and whatever army he might have gathered were at least forty miles away near Raleigh.⁵

The Union right wing had halted on the night of the 19th near Falling Creek Church. This placed General Howard approximately twenty miles from the scene of battle around Bentonville. Word of General Johnston's attack did not arrive until after dark. One officer recounted that:

At about half past nine, one of General Slocum's aids came up at a dashing pace, and, throwing himself from his horse, asked for General Sherman. We all gathered round as he told the particulars of the battle. The commander-in-chief would have made a good subject for Punch or Vanity Fair. He had been lying down in General Howard's tent and hearing the inquiry for him . . . he rushed out to the camp-fire without stopping to put on his clothes. He stood in a bed of ashes up to his ankles,

³ McClurg, "Last Chance," 398.

⁴ McClurg, "Last Chance," 398.

⁵ Beach, "Battle of Bentonville," 30.

chewing impatiently the stump of a cigar, with his hands clasped behind him, and with nothing on but a red flannel undershirt and a pair of drawers.⁶

The rider described the four assaults made on the Union positions, and voiced his fear that General Slocum's left wing could have been defeated.⁷ These words were all that was necessary for Sherman to order a complete mobilization of all troops. Camp was broken and the division commanders readied their men for a return march to Bentonville.

Meanwhile, the Union Seventeenth Corps had reached Smith's Chapel, seven miles from Mount Olive, by the end of the day. This placed General Blair, commander of the corps and the supply wagons which he had been ordered to closely guard, approximately at a six-hour march from Sherman's camp at Falling Creek Church.⁸

General Sherman's orders called for General Slocum to bring up the two divisions which guarded his wagon trains, and for Hazen's division of the Fifteenth Corps, located near Lee's Store, to retrace its steps back to Bentonville and provide reinforcements. This gave General Blair time to mobilize his encamped troops as well as the three remaining divisions of the Fifteenth Corps. These latter divisions were ordered to begin their march at dawn so that they would approach the left rear flank of General Johnston's army from the direction of Cox's

⁶ McClurg, "Last Chance," 399.

⁷ McClurg, "Last Chance," 399.

⁸ Barrett, Sherman's March, 176; Nichols, Story of the Great March, 262.

Bridge.⁹ General Sherman hoped to surprise and defeat the Confederate army by striking it from two different directions if it should still be entrenched when all of the Union forces converged on the battlefield.¹⁰ This plan was contingent upon whether or not General Slocum could keep Johnston's army facing west.¹¹

Slocum's most desperate plea for reinforcements and ammunition arrived by dispatch rider in Sherman's camp around 2 A.M. on the morning of the 20th. This message had been dated at 8 o'clock on March 19, at approximately the time when the Union Twentieth Corps had been hit the hardest by the five successive Confederate charges.¹² Upon receiving Slocum's dispatch, Sherman decided to send additional reinforcements in the even they were needed so he ordered General Schofield, who had occupied Kinston, to push rapidly for Goldsboro. He was further instructed to be prepared to cross Little River in the direction of Smithfield as far as the town of Millard. Sherman further ordered General Terry to march from Faison's Depot to Cox's Bridge to lay a pontoon bridge so as to establish a crossing there on the Neuse River.¹³ This decision would later prove very beneficial because a detachment of Confederate troops burned Cox's Bridge that very morning. General

⁹ Sherman, Official Account, 104.

¹⁰ H. W. Slocum to Major-General William T. Sherman, March 19, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 904; W. T. Sherman to Maj. Gen. H. W. Halleck, May 9, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 25.

¹¹ Sherman, Memoirs, II, 303.

¹² Cox, March to the Sea, 194.

¹³ Sherman, Official Account, 104.

Johnston ordered that the bridge be burned "at all hazards" if the Confederate guards protecting the crossing were dislodged. Had the structure fallen into Union hands, the way would have been left open for them to outflank the enemy in the rear by driving down north of Bentonville.¹⁴

The decision to send General William Hazen's division back to Bentonville first to aid General Slocum was due to the fact that his body of men was the closest to Bentonville. Delays on the 19th had prevented him from commencing his march until 3 P.M. Hazen was further hampered toward nightfall when his men were forced to cross a swamp ". . . traversed by the worst road of the whole campaign."¹⁵ He finally managed to make camp at 11 P.M., and the Union troops and began to bed down for the night when a messenger arrived with an urgent message to break camp and begin a night march back to Bentonville to aid General Slocum's beleaguered wing. The exhausted army broke camp and marched back over the treacherous roads. Hazen's division reached Slocum's headquarters situated at the Harper House at daylight on the 20th. Their trek had covered a distance of twenty miles; all of it in the dark and on unfamiliar roads and, furthermore, most of the men had not eaten.¹⁶

¹⁴ John B. Sale to Col. S. D. Pool, March 18, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 1436; Barrett, Sherman's March, 177.

¹⁵ William B. Hazen, A Narrative of Military Service (Boston: Ticknor and Company, 1885), 359, hereinafter cited as Hazen, Narrative of Military Service.

¹⁶ Hazen, Military Narrative, 359; Force, "Marching Across Carolina," 285.

The men of the Union Fifteenth and Seventeenth Corps ran into similar conditions on their night march back to Bentonville. One participant described their predicament: "Rain fell in torrents all night long; the lightning was fearful, and one bolt struck a portion of the column, severely shocking several men."¹⁷

General C. R. Woods' First Division of the Fifteenth Corps led the Union advance at sunrise on March 20, down the road west from Cox's Bridge. Contact with the enemy was made when they ran into the Confederate left flank. Wood's Division the road barred by a line of defensive works which had been thrown up sometime during the night.¹⁸ The road upon which they were marching ran nearly parallel to and about a mile in the rear of the Confederate infantry line. Apparently, General Woods' approach caught the Confederate picket outposts by surprise. Word spread quickly though and Joe Wheeler was ordered to mount his cavalry and block further progress by the bluecoats. Speed was imperative because the Union troops were in a position to outflank the Confederate entrenchments in the front and rear.¹⁹ Swiftness of action was one ability in which "Fightin' Joe" had become well known. The

¹⁷Fenwick Y. Hedley, Marching Through Georgia. Pen-Pictures of Everyday Life in General Sherman's Army from the Beginning of the Atlanta Campaign Until the Close of the War (Chicago: M. A. Donahue and company, 1887), 406, hereinafter cited as Hedley, Everyday Life in Sherman's Army.

¹⁸Beach, "Battle of Bentonville," 30.

¹⁹William C. Dodson, Campaigns of Wheeler and His Cavalry 1862-1865 from Material Furnished by General Joseph Wheeler to Which is Added His Concise and Graphic Account of the Santiago Campaign of 1898 (Atlanta: Hudgins Publishing Co., 1899), 350-351, hereinafter cited as Dodson, Campaigns of Wheeler; Hughes, "William Joseph Hardee," 561.

resulting maneuver exemplified this young Wheeler's impetuosity:

He promptly gathered such of his troops that were not needed elsewhere and galloped to the scene, most gallantly charged and temporarily checked the enemy's lines. Taking advantage of this check, he promptly dismounted his riflemen and throwing them into position behind a fence which served as a barricade, fought with . . . determined vigor as to hold back the entire force until General Johnston had charged his line. . . . Wheeler then withdrew a short distance, only to take another position, which he held until General Hoke had completed a strong line of works and prepared his troops for action.²⁰

Wheeler was able to play only a delaying action at best because of the sheer numbers of the Union divisions pushing their way down the road. The Union troops were determined to join General Slocum's tired veterans as one member of the Sixth Iowa testified: ". . . the firing was brisk and the boys were hot for the sport."²¹

The Ninety-Seventh Indiana Regiment was able to push General Wheeler's dismounted cavalry back almost a mile and a half.²² The Union vanguard was able to continue its push because fresh troops could be pulled into the advance as the exhausted ones fell back. The result was described by a Union infantryman: "We drove them five miles in a short time. We charged them and drove them from all their rail barricades until we came onto their main column of infantry."²³

²⁰ Dodson, Campaign of Wheeler, 350-351.

²¹ Howard Norman Monnett (ed.), "The Awfulest Time I Ever Saw: A Letter From Sherman's Army," Civil War History, VIII (September 1962), 287, hereinafter cited as Monnett, "Awfulest Time."

²² France, Battle of Bentonville Study, March 20, 2.

²³ Monnett, "Awfulest Time," 287.

The Confederate general sent a dispatch in haste to General Johnston at 11:05 A.M., informing him of the perilous situation at hand. "I have formed a dismounted line here very near Flower's house, and can hold the enemy in check till we are flanked out of it. The line is a very short one however. . . ." ²⁴ The position indicated by Wheeler in the dispatch placed his cavalry approximately a mile east and to the rear of the main Confederate line.

During this heated engagement General Wheeler had his horse shot out from under him and he came very close to being killed. This was but one of many narrow escapes experienced by the cavalry commander. ²⁵

General Johnston was fully aware of the necessity of repositioning his left flank in order to meet the surge of Union troops now at his back door. He ordered the left flank to be swung back so that it was nearly parallel to the Goldsboro road. The extreme left was somewhat refused and prolonged by the use of cavalry. Thus, the Confederate line of defense from left to right formed a "V" instead of the previous sickle shape. ²⁶

General Lafayette McLaws' division was ordered to fill the gap on the right flank which had been left by Wheeler's cavalry. General Hardee accompanied McLaws to his newly assigned position. While riding

²⁴J. Wheeler to General J. E. Johnston, March 20, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 1443.

²⁵Dodson, Campaign of Wheeler, 351.

²⁶Hagood, Memoirs, 361; Beach, "Battle of Bentonville," 30.

there the two generals made a hasty reconnaissance mission. They subsequently discovered a junction of two roads behind the new left flank, which was strategically important. Portions of Hampton's cavalry as well as an infantry brigade were placed there to protect it.²⁷

Hoke's North Carolinians took position in the gap vacated by Wheeler's cavalry. Thus the Confederate army was made up in the following alignment: Hagood's brigade occupied the left of Hoke's division and Kirkand's brigade was situated on the right. Harrison's Georgia brigade, from William Hardee's command, prolonged and terminated the infantry line on the left flank. The remainder of Hardee's command was held in reserve behind this flank, and the Tennessee troops kept their former positions on the right flank as they had done on the 19th. The Confederate entrenchments straddled the east and west forks of the roads leading from Bentonville.²⁸ General Johnston's flanks rested on Mill Creek which made Mill Creek Bridge his only line of retreat to Smithfield. In order to guard the weakened extreme left flank of the Confederate line, Wheeler's and Butler's cavalry were strung out for a distance of 1,200 yards and were ordered to dismount.²⁹

²⁷ Hughes, "William Joseph Hardee," 561; Powell Reminiscences; McLaws Order Book, March 20 entry.

²⁸ Hagood, Memoirs, 361; Synopsis of General J. Wheeler, March 23, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 1131.

²⁹ Synopsis of General J. Wheeler, March 23, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 1131; Sherman, Official Account, 105; Beach, "Battle of Bentonville," 30.

By noon of the 20th, the bulk of the Fifteenth Corps, with Generals Sherman and Logan at its head, arrived on the battlefield. The troops began to deploy and throw up trenches just north of the Goldsboro road. Meanwhile, William Hazen's division of the Fifteenth Corps, which had arrived at dawn, and General Absolom Baird's division were ordered to bolster General Slocum's depleted forces.³⁰ The arrival of fresh infantrymen was welcomed by the battle-worn troops of the Union Fourteenth and Twentieth Corps.³¹

The opposing armies kept busy in the early afternoon by further strengthening their positions. More Union troops continued to arrive on the battlefield. While fighting was not extremely heavy, skirmishes continued to cause the number of casualties to increase. Artillery fire was taking its toll of wounded on both sides.

General Slocum ordered that the home of John and Amy Harper was to be converted into a hospital. The yellow and green colors of the U.S. Army hospital flag was hung from the second floor to let everyone know that the gruesome work of saving bullet-torn bodies was taking place within. This two-story frame house and the outbuildings which constituted a smoke house and slave cabin were filled with wounded and dying men.³² Mrs. Harper assisted the Union surgeons in every way possible. Men wearing both blue and gray were brought in for care.³³

³⁰ Sherman, Official Account, 105.

³¹ McClurg, "Last Chance," 399.

³² Smithfield Herald, September 13, 1927.

³³ Mrs. John A. Anderson, "North Carolina Boy Soldiers at the Battle of Bentonville," Confederate Veteran, XXXV (May, 1927), 175,

The furniture in the house was stacked out of the way and blankets as well as straw were placed on the floors to absorb the blood. The doors were taken down to be used as operating tables. Sterilization was not possible and in many cases the amputations caused more harm than good. Infections and gangrene were almost normal results of these hasty operations.

Since the Harper House remained more than a mile behind the main battle lines throughout the three-day conflict, it remained a safe and convenient place to care for the severely wounded as opposed to field hospitals which had to be set up on or close to the battlefield wherever numerous casualties had to be treated on the spot. One Union officer recorded a scene he observed at a makeshift hospital during the battle of Bentonville which may have been located at the Harper House:

A dozen surgeons and attendants in their shirt sleeves stood at crude benches cutting off arms and legs and throwing them out of the windows, where they lay scattered over the grass. The legs of the infantrymen could be distinguished from those of the cavalry by the size of their calves, as the march of 1,000 miles had increased the size of one and diminished the size of the other.³⁴

The effect of this battle was felt in an ever-increasing degree by the people of Bentonville. The barrage of artillery and musket fire on March 19 had proven especially dangerous. Ten-year-old Dora Hood

hereinafter cited as Anderson, "North Carolina Boy Soldiers."

³⁴William Douglas Hamilton, "In at the Death or the Last Shot at the Confederacy," Sketches of War History 1861-1865. Papers Read before the Ohio Commandery of the Loyal Legion of the United States (Cincinnati: R. Clarke and Co., 6 vols., 1908), VI, 343, hereinafter cited as Hamilton, "Last Shot of the Confederacy."

recalled that ". . . during the hottest of the battle, flying shot and shell made it dangerous to stay even in the house."³⁵ A private in the Twentieth Illinois Regiment confirmed this story. He remarked that "many women and children are seen wondering about having been driven from their homes by flying bullets."³⁶

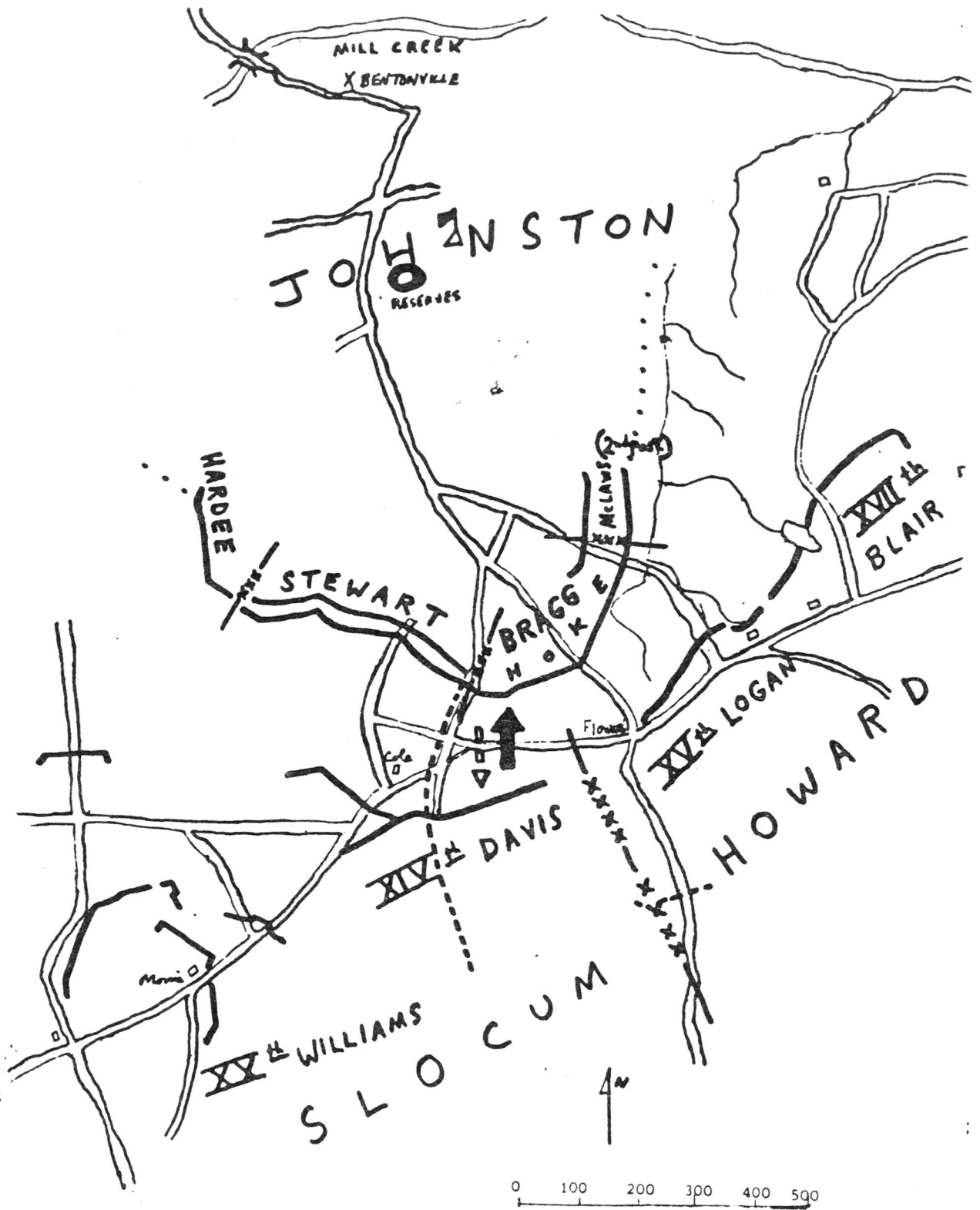
With the arrival of fresh troops, backing him, General Slocum decided to take the offensive once again. He ordered an assault on Hoke's defense lines late in the afternoon. General James Morgan's division was ordered to advance. Upon reaching the Confederate earthworks, they were found to be empty. Orders were given once again to advance but this time the pace was increased to "double-quick." William Vandever's brigade ran for a distance of over a half mile through swamp, dense underbrush, vines, and logs.³⁷ Kirkland's Confederate brigade heard loud crashing and voices of struggling men to its rear. Soon the Federals could be seen advancing through the morass. Kirkland immediately ordered his troops to form ". . . into line, faced to the rear!"³⁸ There had been no time to build breastworks so the men lay down. The right of the Confederate line, Company A, Seventeenth North

³⁵Smithfield Herald, September 13, 1927.

³⁶Mary A. Anderson (ed.), The Civil War Diary of Allen Morgan Geer, 20th Regiment, Illinois Volunteers (New York: Cosmos Press, 1977), 206, hereinafter cited as Anderson, Diary of Allen Geer.

³⁷H. Lund to Capt. John P. Hollers, March 24, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 499; J. E. Johnston to General R. E. Lee, March 27, 1865, 1056.

³⁸Clark, Histories of the North Carolina Regiments, IV, 548-549, 698.



Erik D. France, Unpublished MS on Bentonville

Approximate Scale in Yards

POSITIONS OF UNION AND CONFEDERATE ARMIES
ON MARCH 20

Carolina Regiment, formed two lines and readied themselves to fire in rank. Captain William Biggs was the only officer under Johnston's command with the reputation of effectively carrying out this tactic which involved one line firing, lying down, and reloading, while the second line repeated the same.³⁹ Timing was the most important factor in this maneuver. On this particular occasion, this method proved very effective. A captain in the Sixteenth Illinois attested to this fact:

. . . we were met by a withering fire of musketry and by grape and canister from four guns, which the enemy had in position on our left flank. . . . Our line was confused, broken, and disorganized . . . yet we were not permitted to stop for a moment, but were rushed . . . [to] within thirty yards of the rebels from which we received a most destructive fire of musketry and artillery.⁴⁰

Piles of dead and wounded Federals fell in front of the deadly fire as shouts of "Fire by file" was heard up and down the Confederate lines. One infantryman from the Sixty-sixth North Carolina recalled that:

"Their [the Union] ranks were mowed down like wheat before the scythe. . . ." ⁴¹ General Johnston heard this unusually brisk rifle fire and inquired as to who was responsible for it. A member of Hardee's staff who had just arrived from the front lines replied that the enemy was attacking Kirkland's brigade. Johnston turned with pride to General Hardee and said, "I am glad of it. I would rather they attack Kirkland than anyone else."⁴²

³⁹Clark, Histories of the North Carolina Regiments, IV, 548.

⁴⁰H. Lund to Capt. John P. Hollers, March 24, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 499.

⁴¹Clark, Histories of the North Carolina Regiments, IV, 698-699.

⁴²Clark, Histories of the North Carolina Regiments, IV, 549.

The repulse of this charge by Kirkland's brigade marked the end of the fighting on March 20 except for a few isolated skirmishes. The North Carolina Junior Reserves had also turned back several determined charges by Union troops during the course of that afternoon. The young boys had proven themselves very courageous. Major Walter Clark, just seventeen years old, viewed the afternoon as ". . . a regular Indian fight . . . behind trees."⁴³ General Hoke commended the "Juniors" in the highest degree by stating that their conduct on the battlefield ". . . was equal to that of the old soldiers who had passed through four years of war."⁴⁴

By 4 o'clock P.M. on the 20th, General Howard had arrived with the Union Seventeenth Corps. These men were ordered to prepare for a fight the next day. The 102nd Illinois Regiment received orders that they were to make an assault on the enemy works the following day. Reaction to this news was mixed. The troops knew they had come so close to the end of the march and yet still more men would die. One private related his feelings: "After hearing this news, we were a sober, silent party. For it is desperate work to charge the enemy's lines over open fields, where, if we should fail, there would be but slight hope of escape from death or imprisonment. . . ."⁴⁵

⁴³Brooks and Lefler, Walter Clark Papers, I, 53, 136.

⁴⁴Clark, Histories of the North Carolina Regiments, IV, 593-594.

⁴⁵Stephen F. Fleharty, Our Regiment. A History of the One Hundred and Second Illinois Infantry Volunteers with Sketches of the Atlanta Campaign, The Georgia Raid, and the Campaign of the Carolinas (Chicago: Brewster and Hanscom, 1865), 161-162, hereinafter cited as Fleharty, History of the One Hundred and Second Illinois.

POSITION OF GENERAL HOWARD'S COMMAND (from The Official Atlas of the Civil War, Plate LXXIX)

General Sherman believed nothing could be accomplished by inviting a full-scale battle of the magnitude which had occurred on the 19th. He was still unsure of General Johnston's actual strength although Federal intelligence placed it somewhere between 40,000 and 45,000 men. These figures, of course, indicated that the Confederate army was twice the size it actually was.⁴⁶ There were other reasons for Sherman's reluctance to attack in full force. His army was exhausted from the march up from Savannah. Also, food and ammunition were critically low.⁴⁷ Finally, Sherman was apprehensive because Generals Schofield and Terry had not captured Goldsboro, securing the rail lines for the shipment of supplies from the coast. They had assured him that the town would be under Union control by March 21 but that was a day away.⁴⁸ All of these uncertainties convinced the general to wait and see what move the Confederate army would make.

During the evening of the 20th, Sherman wrote a letter to General Slocum: "Johnston hoped to overcome your wing before I could come to your relief. Having failed in that I cannot see why he remains and still think he will avail himself of night to get back to Smithfield. I would rather avoid a general battle but if he insists on it, we must

⁴⁶ France, *Battle of Bentonville Study*, March 20, 5.

⁴⁷ Barrett, *Sherman's March*, 178.

⁴⁸ J. M. Schofield to Major-General William T. Sherman, March 20, 1865, *Official Records (Army)*, Series I, XLVII, Part II, 922.

accommodate him."⁴⁹ Because of the possibility that the battle might continue longer, Sherman ordered wagons to be sent to Kinston to gather supplies and return to Bentonville as quickly as possible.⁵⁰

The Union commanders' concern was unwarranted. Johnston was a sensible commander and he knew his chances of defeating Sherman's entire army were very slim. His failure to defeat the Fourteenth Corps on the preceding day had virtually dashed all hopes of preventing the Union army he then faced from reaching Goldsboro.⁵¹ Confederate intelligence estimated the combined Union left and right wings at approximately 44,000 troops.⁵² Johnston decided to cease offensive operations and concentrate on the safe removal of the wounded to Smithfield. He estimated that two days would be needed to complete this operation.⁵³

On the evening of March 20, orders were issued to Captain J. M. Robinson, engineer in charge of railroads in Raleigh, to dispatch as many trains as possible to Smithfield to aid in the transportation of the wounded. General Johnston further ordered that a medical officer be sent to the same town to oversee the evacuation.⁵⁴

⁴⁹W. T. Sherman to Major-General Henry Slocum, March 20, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 919.

⁵⁰Sherman, Official Account, 106.

⁵¹Johnston, Narrative of Military Operations, 389.

⁵²J. E. Johnston to General R. E. Lee, March 27, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 1057.

⁵³Johnston, Narrative of Military Operations, 389.

⁵⁴Braxton Bragg to Lieutenant Colonel A. Anderson, March 20, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part II, 1444.

Johnston decided to keep his troops in Bentonville through March 21. He was confident that his entrenched troops, could withstand a Union attack.⁵⁵ The Confederate position was strong, concentrating along a curving pine ridge with a swampy ravine in front of it. His most pressing problem at that point was to protect his retirement route across the Mill Creek Bridge in the town of Bentonville.

By the end of the day on March 20, the Union lines had taken a shape which roughly corresponded with that of the Confederate works. The armies opposed each other in the following way: General Kilpatrick's cavalry guarded any advances on the extreme left flank; Alpheus Williams' Twentieth Corps remained in the original earthworks it had erected on the previous afternoon and evening; General Davis' Fourteenth Corps was dug in several hundred yards to the east of the Twentieth Corps and just south, across the road from what remained of the Cole House. General Logan's Fifteenth Corps was situated south of the Goldsboro road, directly opposite General Hoke's Confederate positions. The extreme right of the Union positions included two divisions of General Frank Blair's Seventeenth Corps. These particular lines extended north-east towards Mill Creek and were located across the ravine from Wheeler's and McLaws' positions.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ France, Battle of Bentonville Study, March 20, 6.

⁵⁶ W. T. Sherman to Maj. Gen. H. W. Halleck, May 9, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 26; John A. Logan to Capt. A. M. Van Dyke, March 31, 1865, 235; Frank P. Blair to Capt. A. M. Van Dyke, April 1, 1865, 383.

Sherman had established his headquarters in the front yard of a farm house some distance south of the Goldsboro road.⁵⁷ It was located well behind the front lines away from any danger. One of Sherman's adjutant generals took this occasion to write about camp life with the commanding general. He confided: ". . . the organization of the army is such that there has been necessarily very little for any of us to do on either of these campaigns so far as any danger was involved."⁵⁸ Interestingly enough, however, it seemed that on the night of March 20, General Sherman was worrying more than any of his staff. One officer described the interesting scene:

The general was walking back and forth in the shade of some large trees. When not receiving messages and sending orders he acted like a nervous and excited man. He had a cigar in his mouth, and stepping up to an officer who was smoking, asked him for a light. The officer handed him his cigar. As the general lit his own cigar he seemed to be listening to the noise of battle. Suddenly he turned, dropped the officer's cigar on the ground, and walked off puffing his own. The officer looked at him a moment, then laughed, picked up the cigar and continued his smoke.⁵⁹

"Old Joe" Johnston had been a crafty adversary and Sherman was not sure what was in store for his army the next day. Goldsboro was so close but yet so far!

⁵⁷ Melvin Grigsby, The Smoked Yank (Sioux Falls: Bell Publishing Company, 1888), 237, hereinafter cited as Grigsby, Smoked Yank.

⁵⁸ Howe, Marching with Sherman, 284.

⁵⁹ Grigsby, Smoked Yank, 237-238.

THIRD DAY OF BATTLE: MARCH 21

Bleak was the only word which described the morning of March 21 for General Johnston and his Confederate army. A cold, steady rain fell on his hungry and exhausted troops.¹ These men remained huddled in their trenches with the belief that General Sherman would attempt to force them from their defense works.² However, Sherman had no intentions of intensifying the situation that morning. As a result, nothing more than general skirmishing took place.³ Most of this constituted isolated assaults by Union troops against the center and left of the Confederate line.⁴

Just after noon, General Johnston ordered an attack on what remained of the Cole House. Union sharpshooters had taken up position in and around the abandoned dwelling and had taken potshots at the Confederates throughout the morning. Generals Walthall and Bate with a small force were able to dislodge these snipers and they subsequently set fire to the house and outbuildings to prevent further use.⁵ Mission accomplished, they withdrew to their lines.

¹Sherman, Official Account, 106.

²J. E. Johnston to General R. E. Lee, March 27, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 1056.

³Elijah P. Burton, Diary of E. P. Burton, Surgeon Seventh Regiment Illinois, Third Brigade, Second Division, Seventeenth Army Corps (Des Moines: The Historical Survey, 2 vols, 1939), I, 72, hereinafter cited as Burton, Surgeon's Diary.

⁴Luvaas, "Bentonville," 351.

⁵Beach, "Battle of Bentonville," 30; Thomas, "Last Battle," 220.

By early afternoon, Lieutenant General Hampton noticed that the enemy had shifted in force towards the left on the opposite side of a small stream which separated the opposing sides. The general had earlier positioned videttes in that area for observation.⁶ Concerned by this movement, Hampton wasted no time in riding to Johnston's headquarters to report it. Speed was imperative because the Confederate left flank was held only by Wheeler's dismounted cavalry and the distance between the end of this line and Mill Creek was only approximately 1,200 yards.⁷

General Lafayette McLaws also noticed this enemy movement, and he reported it to General Hardee. Upon notification of these developments, Kennedy's Brigade was ordered by Hardee to reinforce General Wheeler.⁸ Meanwhile, General Hampton had reached Johnston's headquarters and informed him that ". . . if the enemy broke through at that point, which was near the bridge . . . our only line of retreat was cut off."⁹

At this time events began to occur so rapidly that confusion reigned within the Confederate lines. Johnston directed Hampton to return to the front and ascertain the situation. As he rode back, he was met by a courier in a great hurry. The rider informed Hampton that the enemy had crossed the stream, driven back the cavalry pickets, and

⁶Hampton, "Bentonville," 704.

⁷McLaws Order Book, March 21 entry; Hughes, "William Joseph Hardee," 563.

⁸McLaws Order Book, March 21 entry.

⁹Hampton, "Bentonville," 704.

had pressed strongly on the main road leading to Mill Creek Bridge.¹⁰ Hampton knew realized that the only Confederate line of retreat would be cut off in a matter of minutes and surrender would be imminent if defensive actions were not undertaken. At that time, Hampton observed Cummings' Georgia Brigade, commanded by Colonel R. H. Henderson, marching on the road. He promptly issued orders for these men, some 200 in number, to march at double-quick to stop the Union advance. Ironically, this brigade was a detachment of General Cheatham's Corps, which had just arrived on the battlefield after having been detained in Salisbury at the railroad depot. Hampton also called in a battery of artillery which he passed on the road while riding south.¹¹

Hampton's force was still too weak to halt the Union spearhead. A rider was sent back to the rear to muster any reserves held in the rear.¹² At this time, Hardee informed Hampton that it had been ascertained that the Union attack was led by General Joseph Mower, a division commander in the Seventeenth Corps.

This impetuous Union officer had just arrived on the battlefield that day and upon his own judgment, without the permission of his superior officers, had decided to capture the bridge across Mill

¹⁰ Hampton, "Bentonville," 704.

¹¹ Hampton, "Bentonville," 704-705; Hughes, "William Joseph Hardee," 563.

¹² Hampton, "Bentonville," 705.

¹³ Hughes, "William Joseph Hardee," 562.



Erik D. France, Unpublished MS on Bentonville

MOWER'S CHARGE ON MARCH 21

Creek.¹⁴ Mower easily broke through General Butler's thin skirmish line which consisted of dismounted cavalry.¹⁵

Hardee was ordered by General Johnston to unite the confused mass of Confederate troops and stop General Mower's advance.¹⁶ Hardee called up Taliaferro's Division, General Hoke's reserve, as well as the Army of Tennessee.¹⁷ It was soon ascertained that most of these troops would not be able to cover the distance fast enough to concentrate in front of Mower's troops. Thus, Hardee left these units and rode to the battle area. The only units found immediately in the vicinity were Colonel Smith's Fourth Tennessee Cavalry composed of two regiments¹⁸ and the Eighth Texas Cavalry, better known as Terry's Rangers. This latter group consisted of just eighty men. However, a tougher group of fighters on horseback could not be found anywhere.

The Tennessee and Texas units answered the summons. An adjutant in Colonel Smith's command described the scene vividly:

An officer of General Hardee's came riding in haste from down the road and, inquiring for the officer, said to Colonel Smith that the enemy were threatening the bridge and asked him to come down there as soon as possible . . . Colonel Smith hastened with all dispatch . . . to

¹⁴France, *Battle of Bentonville Study*, March 21, 2; J. E. Johnston to R. E. Lee, March 27, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 1057.

¹⁵John W. Dubose, General Joseph Wheeler and the Army of Tennessee (New York: Neale Publishing Co., 1912), 453, hereinafter cited as Dubose, General Joseph Wheeler.

¹⁶Johnston, Narrative of Military Operations, 391.

¹⁷Hughes, "William Joseph Hardee," 562.

¹⁸Samuel Scoggins, "The Fourth Tennessee Cavalry at Bentonville, N.C.," Confederate Veteran, XXV (October 1917), 446, hereinafter cited as Scoggins, "The Fourth Tennessee Cavalry."

the designated spot. The field hospital . . . was close by; and as the command passed down the road, we could see men escaping from the hospital and a general scattering of men, evidencing that something of a stirring nature was happening. We found General Hardee standing on the road. . . . He at once ordered the regiments into line along the road and to charge through the woods, and, on coming up with the enemy, to drive them from the field. There was no force of our own in front of us, and a gap of a quarter of a mile or more from the creek to where our line extended from the right.¹⁹

As the Tennessee cavalry attacked the left center of Mower's line, it appeared that all of the other Confederate units which had been assembled to attack managed to hit the Union columns at approximately the same time. Alfred Cumming's brigade attacked the head of the Union advance and at the same time the Eighth Texas Cavalry charged the Union left flank, with General Hardee personally in command. Hampton simultaneously struck the right flank with Young's Brigade, commanded by Colonel Wright.²⁰ General Wheeler was able to strike the rear of the Federal column with 500 men from General William Allen's Alabama Brigade and drive a wedge between Mower's Brigade and the rest of the Seventeenth Corps. One cavalryman on the field who witnessed the Confederate envelopment of the enemy commented that the charge from Terry's Rangers was "rarely equaled and never surpassed in impetuosity and daring. . . . The Texans under Doc Matthews' leadership threw themselves upon that corps of infantry with a recklessness that indicated do or die on their

¹⁹ Scoggins, "The Fourth Tennessee Cavalry," 446.

²⁰ Clark, Histories of the North Carolina Regiments, III, 197-198; Luvaas, "Bentonville," 352; Joseph A. Mower to Capt. C. Cadle, Jr., March 29, 1865, Official Records (Army), 391-392; J. W. Fuller to Lt. Charles Christensen, March 25, 1865, 395-396; Hagood, Memoirs.

part."²¹ General McLaws, after witnessing the event, proclaimed that "he had soldiered with 'Jeb' Stuart on his many exploits in Virginia and Maryland, but had never witnessed a charge equal in efficiency and results to this one."²² Another on-the-scene witness declared that the Texas Rangers went into battle ". . . holding their bridle reins in their mouths and a pistol in each hand."²³

General Mower's attempt to capture Mill Creek bridge had been prevented. His men were forced to retreat into a ravine some distance to the rear, and as most of the rifle fire subsided, they withdrew back to their original positions. Mower wanted to regroup his troops and make another attempt, but General Sherman ordered him to cease offensive operations.²⁴

Only with great fortitude and bravery were a combined force of no more than 1,000 Confederates supported by only two pieces of artillery able to halt Mower's determined assault of more than 2,500 men.²⁵ Mower's attack was halted just 200 yards short of General Johnston's

²¹J. P. K. Blackburn, "Reminiscences of Terry's Rangers," The Southwestern Historical Quarterly, XXII (July, October 1918), 170, hereinafter cited as Blackburn, "Reminiscences of Terry's Rangers."

²²Blackburn, "Reminiscences of Terry's Rangers," 171.

²³Clark, Stars and Bars, 196-197.

²⁴Luvaas, "Bentonville," 352; Sherman, Memoirs, II, 304; William Andrew Fletcher, Rebel Private, Front and Rear (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1954), 144, hereinafter cited as Fletcher, Rebel Private.

²⁵France, Battle of Bentonville Study, March 21, 2-3; James G. Holmes, "The Artillery at Bentonville," Confederate Veteran, III (April 1895), 103, hereinafter cited as Holmes, "The Artillery of Bentonville."

headquarters,²⁶ and just 100 yards from the main road to Bentonville used by the Confederate army.²⁷ Sherman later admitted that he should not have restrained Mower's assault. He recalled: "I think I made a mistake there, and should rapidly have followed Mower's lead with the whole of the right wing, which would have brought on a general battle, and it could not have resulted otherwise than successfully for us, by reason of our vastly superior numbers. . . ."²⁸

Mower's troops suffered heavy casualties as a result of the action. The Confederates had also captured many prisoners.²⁹ The heaviest casualties among the Confederate army during the afternoon charge occurred among Terry's Rangers.³⁰ One casualty that took place cast a shadow over the success of the Confederate defenders. General Hardee's sixteen-year-old son, Willis, was fatally wounded.³¹ Hardee

²⁶J. W. Fuller to Lieut. Charles Christensen, March 25, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 396.

²⁷Hagood, Memoirs, 362.

²⁸Sherman, Memoirs, II, 304.

²⁹B. L. Ridley, "Last Battles of the Civil War," Confederate Veteran, III (March, 1895), 71, hereinafter cited as Ridley, "Last Battles of the War." An interesting sidelight to this incident took place when several of these Union captives were questioned and it was discovered that they could not speak English. They were troops from a Pennsylvania Dutch regiment.

³⁰M. J. Davis, "Eighth Texas Cavalry at Bentonville," Confederate Veteran, XXIV (April 1916), 184, hereinafter cited as Davis, "Eighth Texas Cavalry."

³¹Rev. G. C. Garrison, "General Hardee's Son," Confederate Veteran XXIV (January, 1916), 7, hereinafter cited as Garrison, "General Hardee's Son."

found out about his son's mortal wound as he returned from the battlefield that evening. He rode up to General Hampton and they momentarily stopped to discuss the events of the day. Hardee commented that the fight had been ". . . nip and tuck, and for a while I thought tuck had it."³² As their conversation concluded, two litter bearers arrived with Willie. General Hardee dismounted and went to look at his son. Witnesses said he then turned quickly around, mounted his horse, and rode off.³³ Hardee had been credited by many of his fellow officers for stopping Mower's advance. This unfortunate occurrence understandably soured the elder Hampton's sense of accomplishment.³⁴ Ironically Willie had joined the Eighth Texas just two hours before the fight. He had left military school at Milledgeville, Georgia twice without permission because of his desire to fight with the Texas Rangers. Upon arriving at Bentonville, Willie had reported to Captain Kyle of Company D, whereupon he was taken before his father. Hardee sensed the determination in his son so he hesitaantly ordered Captain Kyle to "swear him into service into your company as nothing else will satisfy."³⁵ Just hours later, young Willie's military career ended as fast as it began, much to the grief of a loving father who knew what the consequences might be when he consented for his son to fulfill his dream.

³² Hampton, "Bentonville," 704.

³³ Hughes, "William Joseph Hardee," 565.

³⁴ Hampton, "Bentonville"; Hughes, "William Joseph Hardee," 565.

³⁵ Blackburn, "Reminiscences of Terry's Rangers," 170.

Day turned into night and further fighting was limited to small skirmishes. At sunset most of the Confederate army faced toward the Union right wing which had given them most of the trouble that day.³⁶

Orders for the evening of the 21st from Johnston's headquarters included an order for Hagood's and Walthall's brigades to replace Wheeler's exhausted cavalry on the left flank. These men were situated further towards Hannah Creek to build up the Confederate line of defense in that direction.³⁷

Meanwhile, General Sherman issued orders for the Fifteenth and Seventeenth Corps to dig in and hold their positions in the event of a renewed attack the following day.

Both sides settled in for a wet, miserable night.³⁸ General Johnston received news that General Schofield had reached Goldsboro during the day. This disturbing development convinced him that it would be fruitless to invite further hostilities with Sherman's army when thousands of reserves were stationed just twenty miles away.³⁹ Johnston was also concerned that the position held by his troops was becoming more hazardous because the only line of retreat, the Mill Creek Bridge, was not only continuously threatened by an addault like that of General Mower, but the creek had become more swollen by the rains. Since all

³⁶ France, *Battle of Bentonville Study*, March 21, 3.

³⁷ Hagood, *Memoirs*, 362.

³⁸ Luvaas, "Bentonville," 353.

³⁹ J. E. Johnston to General R. E. Lee, March 27, 1865, *Official Records (Army)*, Series I, XLVII, Part I, 1057.

of the wounded who could be transported had been removed, Johnston ordered a withdrawal of the entire army during the night to Smithfield. He intended to complete this retreat across Mill Creek Bridge by day-break of the following morning.⁴⁰

⁴⁰J. E. Johnston to General R. E. Lee, March 27, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 1057; Johnston, Narrative of Military Operations, 392.

AFTERMATH

Johnston's troops began their withdrawal at approximately midnight of the 21st. A heavy rain fell as the weary men trudged down the mired road through Bentonville. The dense thickets which had impaired their deployment onto the battlefield on the 19th did the same once again except the darkness hampered the march even more.¹ Conditions remained so bad throughout the hours before sunrise on the 22nd that the rear of the Confederate army was still in Bentonville at 8 A.M.

General Wheeler had been assigned to protect any remnants of the Southern army which had not crossed the bridge by daybreak.² This precaution proved to be a fortunate one because Union skirmishers moving forward at dawn discovered the abandoned Confederate positions. Word spread quickly through the ranks and General C. R. Wood's First Division of the Fifteenth Corps was ordered to march at "double-quick" to the town of Bentonville. As they made their way along the muddy roads, Confederate dead and wounded were found along the roadside left behind in the hasty retreat.³

Wood's reconnaissance made contact with Joe Wheeler's cavalry before reaching the town and a lively skirmish ensued. The Confederate horsemen retired slowly in front of Wood's force as the remainder of

¹Dubose, General Joseph Wheeler, 453.

²Dodson, Campaigns of Wheeler, 352.

³Robt. F. Catterson to Capt. Fred H. Wilson, March 25, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 259; George A. Stone to Capt. Fred H. Wilson, March 26, 1865, 268.

their comrades crossed the Mill Creek Bridge. By 9:00 A.M., all of the men and wagons had made the crossing and Wheeler instructed his cavalry to follow. A hasty attempt to set fire to the bridge was made, but the Union pursuers were able to extinguish the flames before heavy damage had been done.⁴

The Confederate cavalry continued to act as the rearguard as they rode north toward Hannah's Creek with the Union infantry in pursuit. The riders were able to outdistance the Federals and were able to make a safe crossing of Hannah's Creek. Wheeler issued orders to dismount and take up defensive positions along the north bank to slow any further pursuit by Wood's division.

In just a short period of time blue uniforms could be seen advancing down the road from Bentonville. Wheeler's troopers opened fire as the Union soldiers rushed the bridge. The Union commander, convinced that the bridge was heavily defended, called the attack off. Soon the Union troops had fallen back out of the range of fire. Further attempts to halt the Confederate withdrawal to Smithfield were not made.⁵ Johnston's army reached the town near sundown where they bivouacked south of the Neuse River. The battered Southern army needed time to rest and regroup.

General Sherman was thus left in possession of the battlefield. The capture of Johnston's army was not foremost on his mind on March 22.

⁴Robt. F. Catterson to Capt. Fred H. Wilson, March 25, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 259; George A. Stone to Capt. Fred A. Wilson, March 26, 1865, 268; Synopsis of J. Wheeler from March 1 to April 15, 1865, 1131-1132; Dodson, Campaigns of Wheeler, 353.

⁵Dodson, Campaigns of Wheeler, 353.

These days just after the battle became permanently ingrained in the minds of the adults as well as children. Dora Hood remembered that ". . . many houses were being burned and people lived continually in the fear of seeing their homes go up in flames."⁷ Her father, J. C. Hood, was one of the leading businessmen in Bentonville. He dug a hole under their house so that family members could hide. Their fears were vividly recounted by Dora:

We were advised . . . to go under the house when shot and shell made it dangerous to stay even in the house. . . . The neighbors had all come in. . . . We had to lie flat on our faces and slide under. My baby brother was just five weeks old. We stayed under the house in the hole for a day and a night . . . when we heard they were going to burn the house over us.⁸

The Hood home was spared the torch but the carriage shop and storehouse were burned. One of the Hood children died of the measles on March 21 because a doctor could not be found. Mr. Hood came close to death himself when a Union soldier shot him in the shoulder for failing to halt when commanded to do so.⁹

Dr. Harper stood in front of his Bentonville home and watched helplessly as his home was also burned. Luckily, the preceding day his house had been turned into a hospital and he had been forced to move most of his furniture in with a neighbor.¹⁰

⁷Smithfield Herald, September 13, 1927.

⁸Smithfield Herald, September 13, 1927.

⁹Smithfield Herald, September 13, 1927.

¹⁰Smithfield Herald, September 13, 1927.

The loss of mules and horses, which were confiscated from almost every family in the area, presented extreme hardship, especially since it was planting season. Jeff Johnston, who was a young boy living close to the battlefield, described a visit by Union cavalry to his home:

"They took our corn, hay, chickens, and turkeys . . . and every farm mule and horse."¹¹ To make up for the lack of work animals, several men in the Johnson family walked to the battlefield and captured ". . . a considerable string of abandoned, blind, and crippled horses and mules which had been left to perish by the soldiers."¹² Young Jeff remembered that these animals, with much care and doctoring, were sufficiently brought back to health so that some crops could be planted that spring. In fact, the corn crop which was harvested in the fall was plentiful to the degree that neighbors who could afford it came from miles around to buy it at \$1.00 per bushel.¹³

James C. Williams, owner of a grist mill near Bentonville, was "visited" by Union troops. Not only was his corn, hams, and prize horse taken, but he was arrested and forced to work for the Fourteenth Corps during the entire three-day battle. Most of his time was spent hauling fence rails from campfire to campfire to provide firewood. He was also placed in charge of pitching tents in the front yard of the Green Flowers plantation on the night of March 20. Williams recalled later that these

¹¹News and Observer (Raleigh), April 8, 1957, hereinafter cited as News and Observer.

¹²News and Observer, April 8, 1957.

¹³News and Observer, April 8, 1957.

tasks were performed with much chagrin because he had been very active in Confederate affairs throughout the war including serving as a militia officer. He always lamented the fact that he had to spend the last few days of the war under servitude of Sherman's army.¹⁴

The townspeople of Bentonville had been left with another legacy of the battle. Many of the wounded from both armies had been hurt too severely to be moved by wagon, so they were left in various homes to recover. Some forty-five soldiers were left in the hands of John and Amy Harper for several weeks. On March 27, General Johnston made arrangements for Doctor J. H. Erskine to ride to Bentonville to investigate the remaining wounded. He found that nineteen of the soldiers had died and had been buried near the Harper House. Twenty-six Confederate soldiers were removed from the Harper place and another twenty-eight were picked up in wagons in Bentonville. Dr. Erskine treated forty-two Union soldiers who remained in the town but were evacuated soon thereafter.¹⁵

The final casualty count for Johnston's army during the battle of Bentonville was 2,606 men. Over 500 of these troops were captured.¹⁶ The Union army lost 1,527 men and most of these casualties had occurred during the severe fighting on the 19th.¹⁷

¹⁴ Smithfield Herald, March 20, 1959.

¹⁵ J. E. Johnston to R. E. Lee, March 27, 1865, Official Records (Army), Series I, XLVII, Part I, 1060.

¹⁶ Luvaas, "Bentonville," 354; McLean, Bentonville Research Study.

¹⁷ Luvaas, "Bentonville," 354.

This struggle would not go down in history as one of the important battles of the Civil War for several reasons. The casualty count for the three-day clash did not approach the large battles which occurred earlier in the war. Furthermore, Bentonville was overshadowed by Lee's surrender at Appomatox and the subsequent collapse of the Confederacy just weeks later. Johnson did not surrender his army to General Sherman until April 26, 1865, at the Bennett Place near Durham Station.

General Johnston had failed in his desperate attempt to stop Sherman's army. Many reasons can be suggested as to why victory was not achieved by Johnston's army. General Bragg's failure to deploy his troops on time in the afternoon of March 19th might have prevented a complete rout of the Union Fourteenth Corps. Even if this had occurred, Sherman was ready to place 30,000 more veterans of the right wing against Johnston's exhausted troops. Furthermore, the combined armies of Generals Schofield and Terry who occupied Goldsboro by March 21 represented 23,000 more men. Outnumbered and ill-equipped, the odds against a Confederate victory remained too great. The great amount of talent among the officers corps in previous years had made up for the lack of men and arms. However, this greatest resource also had its limitations when matched against the industrial might of the North.

Johnston County residents had witnessed the last major conflict of the Civil War. The passage of the Union army through the area had left lasting impressions. In later years these people were proud that an attempt to stop Sherman was made at Bentonville. However, down through the years the battleground remained virtually unchanged from

those March days of 1865. The well-preserved trenches dug during the battle stand today as silent reminders of the conflict.

Not until 1965 did the state of North Carolina make Bentonville Battleground a state historic site. The Harper House has been restored and the yellow and green hospital flag hangs once again from the second floor. A visitors center serves as a battlefield museum where hundreds of artifacts are on display which have been unearthed over the years by farmers as well as relic hunters.

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