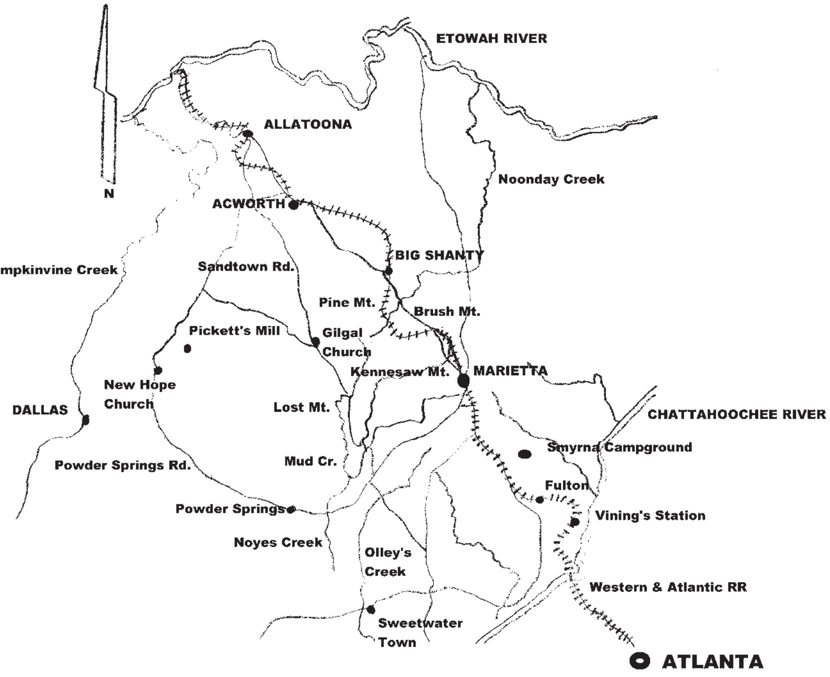
N
ETOWAH RIVER
ALLATOONA
Noonday Creek
ACWORTH
BIG SHANTY
Pumpkinvine Creek
Sandtown Rd.
Pine Mt.
Brush Mt.
Pickett's Mill
Gilgal
Church
Kennesaw Mt.
MARIETTA
New Hope
Church
DALLAS
Lost Mt.
CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVER
Smyrna Campground
Powder Springs Rd.
Mud Cr.
Fulton
Powder Springs
Vining's Station
Noyes Creek
Olley's
Creek
Western & Atlantic RR
Sweetwater
Town
ATLANTA

AREA MAP

Chapter One

The Darkest Night

An aged black man, too old to see well, too frightened to look, huddles in a small, one-room shanty near the Dallas Road. All through the night, during a constant drumming of rain, he has listened to the sounds of an army passing outside, wondering what it meant, wondering where armies go. The soldiers had passed this way before, but never so many, never so loud, and never has he been so afraid. At first the noise is deafening, but distinct: horses and mules braying, wagons and caissons rumbling, men cursing, all sloshing and struggling through the thick, red mud of north Georgia. Later, as the rain grows heavy, the sounds become indistinguishable, muffled into a long, raucous, train-like groan—a groan persisting till daybreak when the great procession seems to have passed. In the first gray light of dawn the rain slackens to a slow drizzle. Now, daring to peer from his doorway, he watches as others continue to slowly file down the road. Still they come, but in small groups or lone soldiers, some straggling, others wounded, followed by mounted cavalry, all enduring a never-ending trail of mud.

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The army slogging down the moonless, muddy road on the night of June 4, 1864 is the Confederate Army of Tennessee, the last hope to stop William Tecumseh Sherman's devastating Federal armies, now deep into Georgia and threatening Atlanta. Since the campaign began a month ago, the outnumbered gray-clad army has been pushed back some eighty miles, forced to retreat from every strong defensive position it has occupied. Tonight it abandons its latest stronghold, the New Hope-Dallas line, and moves southeast to counter another of Sherman's flanking movements as he sidles east to rejoin his supply line, the Western & Atlantic Railroad.

The retreat is sheer misery. Exhausted soldiers drenched to the bone by a cold, pelting rain blindly crowd along timber-lined roads that have turned into rivers of mud, knee deep, sucking the shoes from their sore feet. Mules snort and labor under whips, struggling to pull the bogged-down wagons and artillery through the mire. "The darkest night of all the dark nights," writes Capt. Sam Foster, a Texas veteran and no stranger to wretched weather and army hardships. "Occasionally, a man would stumble and fall flat in the mud, get up, and go on again," he notes, recalling the ordeal of the march in his diary. And an Alabama private, "being bedaubed with mud up to my waist," quickly agrees: "It was so dark that we could not see which way to go . . . the road was lined with soldiers trying to march, and every movement would witness the fall of several fellows, but up they would get and travel on again."[1]

Sometime during the cloudy morning hours the rain takes a temporary break, along with the soldiers, who draw a well-earned whiskey ration. Despite the severe toil of the night-long march, Captain Foster and the men of the Twenty-Fourth Texas regiment try to make the best of the wretched march they've been enduring, "passing their jokes as usual." Others, while they muster the will to tread on, find nothing humorous about the muddy affair, and they have become discouraged by the constant retreating. But for the most part, the morale of the army still remains high as evidenced in their letters home, such as the one Columbus Sykes writes to his wife the morning after their grueling march: "The army is still strong and confident, ready and anxious to fight the enemy whenever *Old Joe* gives the word."[2]

"Old Joe" is the nickname these same soldiers bestowed upon their commanding general back in Dalton before the campaign had started. But in the elegant parlors of Virginia's prominent society he is, in fact, Joseph Eggleston Johnston: fifty-seven years old, rather small of frame, possessing a noble bearing, balding with a Vandyke beard, and described by an admiring Tennessee private as "the very picture of a general." To be sure, that picture suits the rank and file of the western army who remain devoted and loyal to their new commander from the Old Dominion. They

Joseph E. Johnston (Courtesy National Archives) appreciate his efforts to provide them with rations, clothing, and provisions that were scant under their former commander, Braxton Bragg. They won't forget how Johnston had boosted their morale by providing furloughs during the cold winter at Dalton, and how he had instilled a new pride in their performance by increasing discipline and instruction. Most important, they value his efforts to keep them alive by avoiding the reckless charges against impossible odds they had formerly been ordered to make. They also see wisdom in his defensive tactics and, despite the continuous retreats, many believe or want to believe that he will somehow find a way to defeat Sherman, save Atlanta, and turn back the hordes of Union troops who have driven them this far into Georgia.[3]

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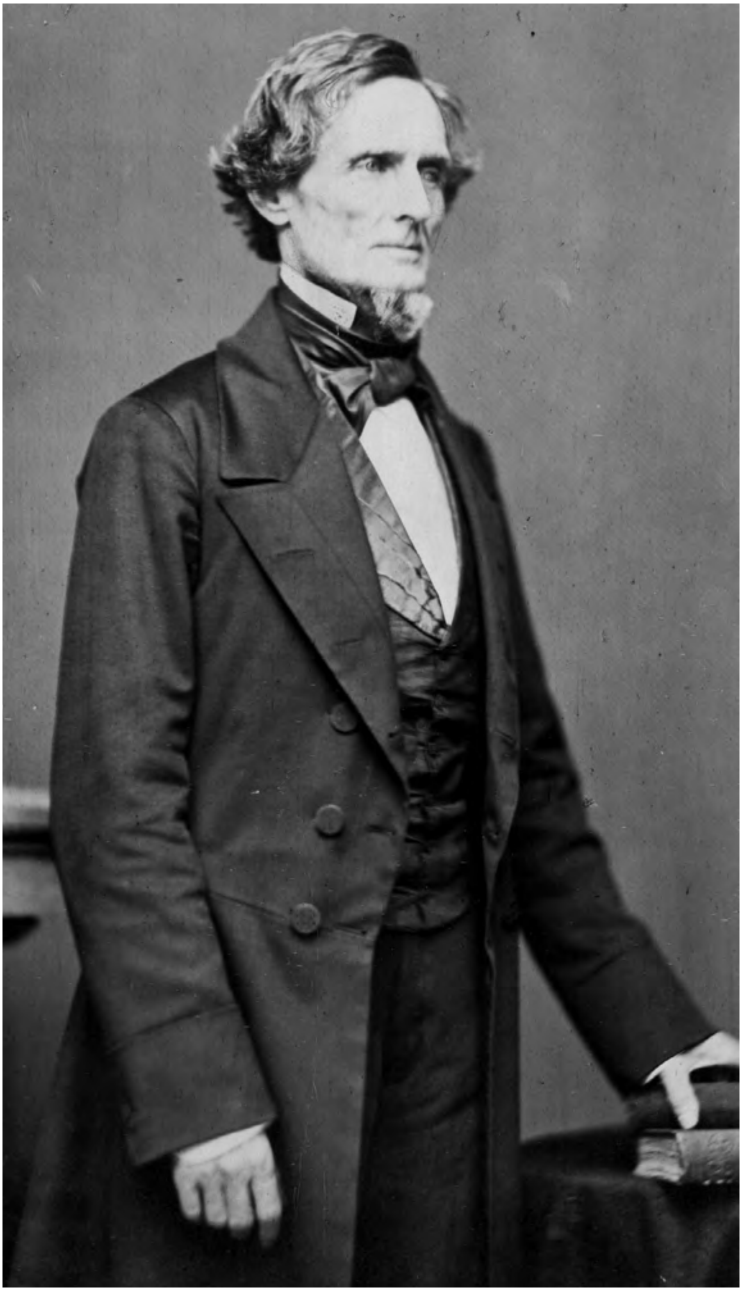
No such optimism is felt by the Confederate War Department in Richmond where Johnston's superiors continue to grumble over the army's constant retreating, a pattern which has continued from Dalton all the way to the mud-slick hills outside Atlanta. Chief among those grumblers is the Confederate president, Jefferson Davis, a righteous but peevish sort, who blames it all on Johnston, a man he finds to be arrogant, petty, uncooperative, and, most disturbingly, unwilling to fight on the offensive. Such intolerant behavior, coupled with the fact that Johnston refuses to reveal or share his strategy and plans for saving Atlanta, is wearing thin on Davis's last nerve.

Nor does Johnston have a sunny relationship with the president. By most accounts, Johnston loathes him. Since early in the war when Davis apparently offended him by ranking him fourth among the first five generals named, the Davis-Johnston feud has continued to swell. Throughout the long war, the two have disagreed and quarreled over nearly every issue, especially military matters where Johnston believes that Davis and his cabinet have been meddlesome and impractical. And by this point, it's almost as if Johnston has developed a split personality. There's the jaunty, dapper Johnston, compassionate and kind, a soldier of vast experience who has won the confidence and favor of his army, and the other Johnston: a touchy, bitter, troubled man, who seems to take pleasure in provoking and tormenting his superiors, especially Jefferson Davis.[4]



Jefferson Davis (Courtesy National Archives)

Louis Wigfall (Courtesy Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress)

Both Davis and Johnston are sensitive when it comes to criticism. Davis, though, is especially intolerant of anyone finding fault with his political policies or questioning his authority over command decisions. And here is where Johnston has either knowingly or otherwise poisoned the waters between the two. That poison appears in the person of Texas senator, Louis Wigfall, who Johnston has befriended and with whom he has formed a sort of political alliance. By nature, the general and the senator are diametric opposites. Wigfall is loud, bombastic, flamboyant, hard-drinking—in all probability an alcoholic—and one of the most savage of the fire-eating secessionists. Ordinarily, he would seem odd company for the calm and reserved Johnston, except for the fact that both men share a mutual, abiding disdain for the president. The pugnacious Wigfall is known to be Davis's most vocal critic, and Johnston's relationship with him only serves to exacerbate the Davis-Johnston feud.[5]

During the course of the war, generals and politicians begin taking sides in the ongoing altercation. Braxton Bragg, for example, who had formerly commanded the Army of Tennessee and now serves as Jefferson Davis's military advisor, agrees with the president that Johnston has the resources but lacks the will to fight, and that his strategy in the Atlanta Campaign has been disastrous. But if anyone should be familiar with the condition and strength of the western army it should be Bragg, who apparently has forgotten how Johnston had supported him during his difficult tenure in command. Bragg, however, feels no debt to Old Joe. It's possible he resents Johnston as his replacement and feels that he could be doing a better job. It's also possible that Bragg, who was generally unpopular while leading the army, is jealous over the affection the soldiers seem to have for Johnston. Whatever the case, he somehow feels justified in discrediting Johnston at every opportunity. By exaggerating the strength of the army, he has deceived Davis into believing that Johnston has ample troops to defeat the Federal army in Georgia but lacks the generalship to achieve victory. And more than anything, Davis wants victory. So regardless of Bragg's low opinion of Johnston's ability as a general, Davis will overlook it. He will even forgive Johnston's petty and hostile behavior, but he will do so only if victory can be achieved.[6]

But as the national bloodbath drags on into its fourth summer, the chances of a Southern victory are growing remote, and the festering feud between Davis and Johnston only serves as a maddening distraction and stumbling block for the Confederacy's hopes. Mary Chesnut, the discerning diarist of the Civil War, places much, if not all, of the blame on Johnston. Writing from Camden, South Carolina, she wonders, "Could conceit and folly go further?" While claiming, "I don't know how the split began," she is convinced that "Joe Johnston's disaffection has been the core round which all restless halfhearted disappointed people consolidated, and Joe Johnston's dissatisfaction with our president and our policy has acted like a dry rot in our armies . . . eating into the very vitals of our distracted country." What's more, like the president, Mary Chesnut is troubled over the general's constant retreats: "He gives up one after another of those mountain passes where one must think he could fight and is hastening down to the plain."[7]

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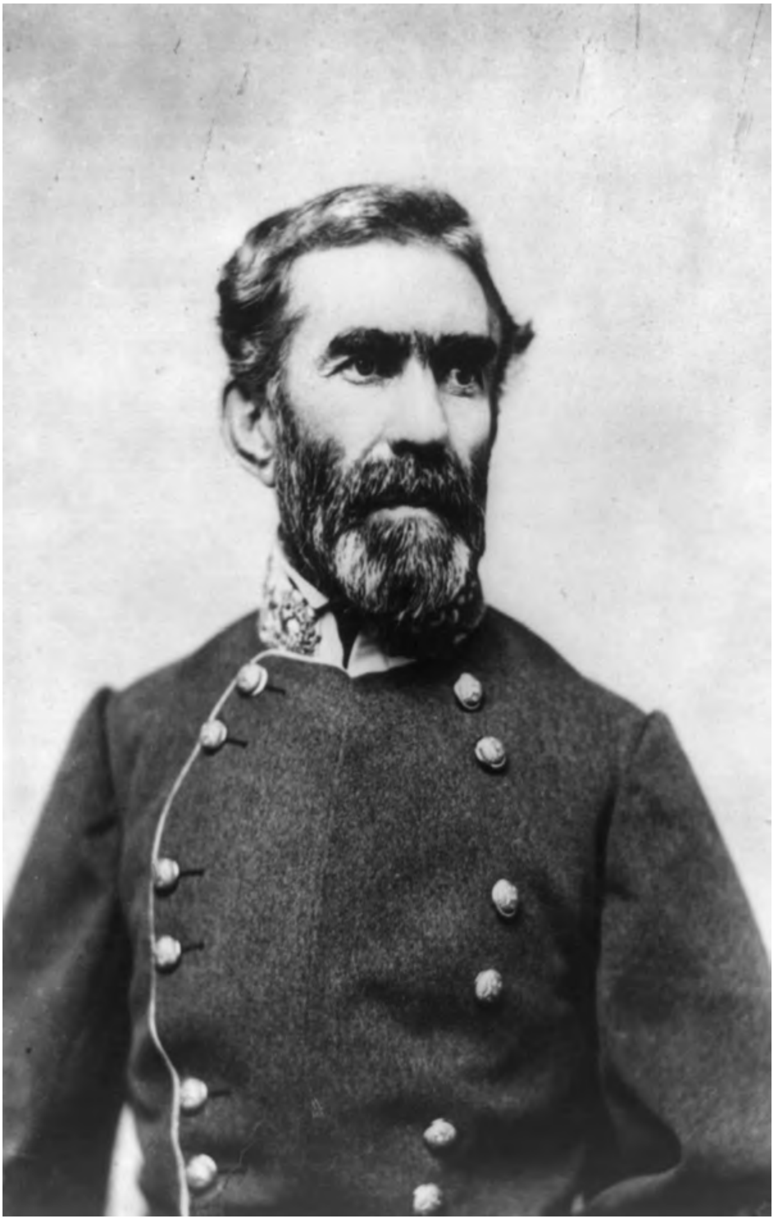
Against such an acrimonious setting, Joe Johnston is ordering yet another retreat, moving his army into the muddy ditches of his latest defensive line, a line which runs in a slanted northeastward direction from Lost Mountain to a small Baptist church known to its members as Gilgal. Then as Union forces begin concentrating in and around the railroad town of Acworth, Johnston continues moving in the same northeast direction until the Army of Tennessee is extended a distance of about eight miles, bending along a line from Gilgal Church to Brush Mountain, which looms to the north of Marietta and just east of the important Western & Atlantic Railroad.

The strength of Johnston's army is a little more than 60,000 effectives, leaving him outnumbered at a ratio of about three to two. But with the exception of some new conscripts and militia recently provided by the state of Georgia, they are, for the most part, tough, battle-hardened veterans. The army is divided into three infantry corps and commanded by generals William J. Hardee, Leonidas Polk, and John Bell Hood. Protecting their flanks are two divisions of cavalry led by generals Joe Wheeler and William Jackson. Here on Johnston's new battle line he places Hardee on the left anchored in the vicinity of Gilgal Church with

Jackson's cavalry sparsely strung out to Lost Mountain. Polk takes the center, from an overgrown hill known as Pine Mountain to a point near the railroad. Hood occupies the right, across the railroad and wrapping around Brush Mountain where Wheeler's cavalry are extended eastwardly, and even beyond that point.[8]

After the ten-day brawl on the New Hope-Dallas line, Johnston has all but abandoned any idea of attacking the Federal army. There, in what came to be known as the Hell Hole, he has seen the suicidal results of assaulting prepared fortifications, first by the enemy's charges at New Hope Church and Pickett's Mill, then by his own mistake of sending valuable soldiers against Union breastworks around the town of Dallas. From this point on, he will remain on the defensive, falling back, inviting their attack on his well-prepared positions, and never taking the offensive unless the opportunity is certain of success. Like the difficult terrain of the Hell Hole, the ground the Rebel army is now holding gives Johnston a defensive advantage. Mountains, hills, ravines, gullies, all covered in thick timber and laced with crooked creeks, make up much of the landscape. Here Johnston will entrench, hidden behind miles of soggy earth and timber on the high ground afforded him by a series of small mountains and ridges, all the while waiting for Sherman to be lured into attacking.[9]

Such a defensive posture is clearly not in keeping with the wishes of Davis, Bragg, and the War Department in Richmond. They prefer that he give battle, attack, and drive the Yankee invaders out of Georgia. Although Johnston, in reference to his defensive victories on the New Hope-Dallas line, has told Bragg that the army "in partial engagements . . . has had great advantage, and the sum of all the combats amounts to a battle," Bragg is not impressed. Thus when he receives Johnston's wire of June 5, telling him that "we have taken this position; our line nearly parallel to the Chattahoochee," Bragg fumes at the news of another retreat. Only the day before, Bragg had written Davis claiming, "The condition of affairs in Georgia is daily becoming more serious," and going on to explain the situation, with the caveat, "We may well apprehend disaster." On June 7, in a contrivance to prod Johnston into doing something offensive, Bragg sends Johnston a copy of this same letter. "The object," he tells Johnston, "is to place before him the real condition of affairs with you."[10]



Braxton Bragg (Courtesy Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress)

So what does the aloof Johnston think of Bragg's threatening ploy? And what does he think of the crescendo of grumbling complaints coming from the government in Richmond or the rumors that he will be replaced? "He thinks little of it," writes one of his aides in a letter to his mother. "His world now is his army. For his army it is. He has made it." Indeed it is, for the present, Old Joe's army, and he is determined to lead it in the defense of Atlanta according to his plan. The problem, of course, is no one knows what the plan is. Davis, Bragg, and the War Department don't know the plan. Johnston's corps commanders haven't been informed of it. Neither does his friend Sen. Louis Wigfall, know anything about Johnston's plan.[11]

By this time it's becoming increasingly clear that Johnston himself doesn't know the plan. He has hinted of it's existence throughout the campaign and even into post-war years contends that he always had a plan. But Johnston's plan, if one exists, is vaporous, changing, or disappearing with each new development. In that, elusive as it seems, may rest his genius: always adapting to the problem before him and preserving his army, which throughout the war has always been more important to him than preserving Southern geography. Although this Fabian strategy limits his actions, he will continue to react defensively to Sherman's every move, falling back so as to stretch his supply lines, always waiting for the perfect circumstances to launch an attack. But Johnston, ever the perfectionist and always cautious, never seems to find that perfect time or place to attack.[12]

Although Johnston doesn't reveal any definite plan for defending Atlanta and hurling Sherman and his blue horde out of Georgia, he makes no secret of his belief that to achieve success and save the city the enemy's lines of supply and communication must be severed. By early June, Johnston begins to insist that Richmond send him enough cavalry to tear up the railroad feeding Sherman's army. "Cavalry on the rear of Sherman, this side of the Tennessee, would do him much harm at present," he wires Bragg. And in the coming weeks his appeals become more relentless, urging Bragg on four more occasions, and once to the president, to send a force of cavalry for this purpose.[13]

"I earnestly suggest," Johnston writes Bragg again, "that Major-General Forrest be ordered to . . . operate on the enemy's rear between his army and Dalton." It seems Old Joe doesn't want just any cavalry. He wants the cavalry led by the "Wizard of the Saddle," the living legend Nathan Bedford Forrest, a backwoodsman from Tennessee with hardly any education, military or otherwise, but a violent soldier of proven success. But Forrest, now under the command authority of Stephen Dill Lee, is preoccupied back in Mississippi, and the hard-pressed Lee has no intention of allowing his best general and valuable cavalry to go to the aid of Johnston. Finally, after much discussion, Bragg and Davis agree that Forrest should remain where he is. For them, it's likely that they see Johnston's plea for cavalry assistance as yet another ruse to delay taking the offensive. Moreover, if the strategy of placing cavalry on the enemy's supply lines is so vital to success, they believe Johnston should use his own horsemen. Of course Johnston disagrees: "We could never spare a body of cavalry strong enough for such a service."[14]

So now as Joe Johnston prepares to resume what historian Shelby Foote calls the "red clay minuet," with the mighty Federal army, he must do so without the help of Forrest or, for that matter, anyone else. He will have to use the army he has and find another tactic to stop Sherman's inexorable advance. But given the situation, Old Joe can think of only one tactic. He orders his engineers to keep laying out new defensive lines of trenches, ditches, and breastworks. So as the early June rains continue to pour, day after day, the men of the Army of Tennessee huddle in their muddy holes and brace for the assault they know is coming.[15]