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Battle of Peach Tree Creek: First nail in Atlanta's coffin

by Robert D. Jenkins Sr.

July 10, 2009

One of a series of articles on Buckhead history from the Buckhead Heritage Society

The morning of Wednesday, July 20, 1864, broke warm, promising another sultry summer day. It would spawn the first offensive action for the new Southern commander, John Bell Hood, and his gray forces as he took over the defense of Atlanta for the Confederate States of America in the fourth summer of the war.

What began as a golden opportunity to repel Northern Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman and his blue legions from the gates of the Gate City, as Atlanta has been called, became a day of missed chances, broken dreams and, for a number of the rebel soldiers, a grave.

The Battle of Peach Tree Creek marked the beginning of the end for the Confederacy, for it turned the page from the patient defense displayed by Gen. Joseph E. Johnston to the bold offense called upon by his replacement, Gen. Hood. Until this point in the Georgia Campaign, the Southern army had fought primarily in the defensive, from behind earthworks, forcing Sherman either to assault fortified lines or to go around them in flanking moves. At Peach Tree Creek, the roles would be reversed for the first time, as Confederates charged Union lines.

Peach Tree Creek is important because it was the last planned battle for Johnston, who was so popular among his men but was held in such contempt by President Jefferson Davis in Richmond. Peach Tree Creek also is important because it was the first of Hood's many offensive exploits as he attempted both to impose his bold will on the rebel army and to repel Sherman's legions from Georgia through aggressive and hard offensive tactics.

Peach Tree Creek offered a clue to what was in store for the Confederates under Hood's leadership. It was the first of many bloody contests that so decimated the Southern Confederacy that she would, by the following spring, be brought to her knees. On the wooded ridges and ravines along Peach Tree Creek's southern shores lie the untold stories of a desperate struggle that littered the countryside with the dead and dying. Today's landmarks like Collier Mill, Tanyard Creek Park, Bobby Jones Golf Club and Cardiac Hill, dotting the upscale neighborhoods of Atlanta's Buckhead community, once were

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the sites of some of the Civil War's bloodiest fighting.

The Battle of Peach Tree Creek is important because it was the beginning of the end for the Deep South and the Confederacy. Peach Tree Creek would be the first in a series of defeats and setbacks from which the South would not recover. Before Peach Tree Creek, there remained some semblance of hope for victory and Southern independence. After Peach Tree Creek and the defeats at Decatur and Ezra Church that quickly followed, there could be no more hope of a military win by the Confederacy. After Peach Tree Creek and its companion battles for Atlanta, any Southerner willing to listen could hear the death throes of the Confederacy.





Peach Tree Creek was the first of three battles in eight days in which Hood led the Confederates in desperate, unsuccessful attempts to repel the Union armies encircling Atlanta. Hood's aggressive plan to sweep a portion of the Northern invaders into the creek and the Chattahoochee River beyond and force the Yankees to retreat would demonstrate good skill in planning but a failure to grasp the logistical requirements needed to make it a success, an inability to account for and adjust to changes in circumstances during the attack, a breakdown in the chain of command, and a piecemeal and mixed effort in execution, all common threads in each of Hood's future battles.

Peach Tree Creek started the South on the downward spiral from which it would never recover. It was the first nail in the coffin of Atlanta and the Confederacy.

This month's article was written by Robert D. Jenkins Sr., who recently completed a book about the Civil War Battle of Peach Tree Creek.

Join the Buckhead Heritage Society on Friday, July 17, at 6:30 p.m. at the Bobby Jones Golf Club to celebrate the 145th anniversary of the Battle of Peach Tree Creek. Have a cocktail overlooking the battlefield and listen while Jenkins discusses his recent findings about troop movements during the battle.

To register, visit www.BuckheadHeritage.com/events. The fee is \$5 for society members and \$10 for nonmembers.

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