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GEOGRAPHIC INFLUENCES IN THE ATLANTA CAMPAIGN

BY F. V. EMERSON

THE Atlanta Campaign is particularly interesting to the student of geography for two reasons. It was influenced in large degree by the resources and topography of the region and it was mainly conducted by generals in whom the "topographic sense" was very keen. Sherman and Jos. E. Johnston were strategists of the first order, who studied their territory with greatest care. Their movements were very largely logical results of earth control.

Sherman says that the march to the sea began with Chattanooga. This was the general's epigrammatic way of saying that the movement from Tennessee southward against the central Confederacy had been long in mind, but the way led through the mountain fortress of Chattanooga, the "shield of the Confederacy." Chattanooga lies at the point where the Tennessee River, coming down the broad Appalachian valley, swings abruptly to the west and cuts its way across the Cumberland plateau. Its valleys and gorges provided a natural pathway from the middle western Confederacy into the Tennessee valley. From Chattanooga railroads following the Appalachian valley radiated northward to Virginia, southward to Atlanta and westward across the plateau to the Mississippi. The possession of Chattanooga was therefore a military necessity to an invading army. Vicksburg had fallen, Gettysburg had been fought when Chattanooga was captured. The Western Confederacy had been sundered by the opening of the Mississippi. Its strength was concentrated in the armies of Lee in Virginia and of Johnston in Georgia. Sherman's task was to pierce the Confederacy to Atlanta and if possible lop off the rest, thus concentrating the fighting in the Atlantic States.

A course from Chattanooga to Atlanta and from thence to the Atlantic lies across three different geological formations, each distinguished by its characteristic topography. Chattanooga lies in the Great Valley, Atlanta in the Piedmont Belt and Savannah on the Coastal Plain.

The Great Valley, as has been noted in the previous paper of this series, is a structural one.¹ Unlike most valleys it is not the work of a river and its tributaries, but its existence is due to the fact that its rocks yield more readily to erosion and weathering than do those on either side. Along the valley belt is a series of upturned strata of limestones and shales; on the east are the resistant crystalline rocks of the mountains and on the west,

¹ Physiographic Control of the Chattanooga Campaign, Jour. Geog., Feb., 1905.

the level strata of the Cumberland Plateau. Of these three formations the tilted strata of the valley weathered fastest and as a consequence the great trough stretches from Alabama to New York.

Relief map of the country from Chattanooga to Atlanta, showing the Cumberland Plateau, Appalachian Valley and Piedmont Plateau. (Photographed from E. E. Howell's model.)

In its southern part the Great Valley is itself divided longitudinally by minor ridges which are remnants of tilted strata which are more resistant than their neighboring strata. At its southern end the Great Valley

widens, its ridges become less distinct or are represented only by fragments, and in Central Alabama the valley loses its identity and merges into the general surface of the Coastal Plain. Referring to the relief map the valley structure is at once apparent from its narrow ridges and parallel streams.

It will be noticed that the country east of the valley and south of the mountains changes in topography. Without any sharp dividing line the valley changes to the Piedmont Belt, so called, of course, from its position at the foot of the mountains. Again there is no sharp line of division between mountains and plateau. Indeed they are identical in structure but

View of Piedmont Plateau looking southwest from the base of Lookout Mountain. The rolling surface is shown. (Photograph by the United States Geological Survey.)

the plateau has suffered greater denudation and has lost its mountainous character. What remains of the former mountains are only the roots, so to speak; at least a mile of overlying rock is said to have been removed.

The Piedmont Belt flanks the mountains from New York to Alabama. Its soil is for the most part fertile, and, coupled with a favorable climate, made this region the granary of the Confederacy. The surface is rolling with a stream arrangement in marked contrast with the parallel streams of the valley, as the relief map shows.

The Coastal Plain flanks the Piedmont Plateau from which it is directly derived. The waste of the plateau has been carried eastward and

southward to form the nearly level strata of the Coastal Plain. The strata slope gently seaward and in Georgia they form the sandy plains over which the army approached Savannah. The line of transition between Coastal Plain and Piedmont is marked by a series of falls and rapids where the streams descend from the hard rocks of the plateau to the softer ones of the plain.

In the winter of 1863, the armies of Sherman and Johnston lay in the northwest corner of Georgia in the vicinity of Dalton. Here the valley is about forty miles wide. The Great Smoky Mountains, an outlying range of the Appalachians, are its eastern wall and the Cumberland Plateau bounds it on the west. The characteristic valley ridges run northeasterly and in war times they were heavily wooded. The roads sought the valleys and only when absolutely necessary did they wind over the "mountains," as the ridges were called. The railroads crossed these ridges by tunnels, as at Tunnel Hill, near Chattanooga, or used the wind gaps or gorges which the streams had cut. The soil is productive but at that time much of the region was uncleared and neither army could subsist on the country. Both were dependent for supplies on the single line of railroad running from Chattanooga to Atlanta.

Johnston was an able commander whom the consensus of military opinion seems to have placed second only to Lee. His management of the Atlanta campaign has made it classic. It is difficult to get an exact idea of the strength of his army, as Johnston's estimate differs from that of the Richmond government, but it probably numbered between fifty and sixty thousand men. Sherman was a commander, bold but not rash. He was an exceedingly careful student of military affairs, giving close attention to feeding and marching as well as to fighting. Before starting upon this campaign he had from the census office a condensed statement of the resources of each county of each of the Cotton States. Swinton writes that he possessed the "geographical eye": "he invariably noted mountains, ravines and rivers and other features and their military importance." He had at the beginning of the campaign about one hundred thousand men.

Dalton was at the apex of a triangle, the eastern side of which was the mountains and the western side the Cumberland Plateau. Johnston's army was outnumbered and he was a hundred miles from his base of supplies at Atlanta, while Chattanooga, the Federal base, was but a few miles away. He lacked the advantage of interior lines such as were enjoyed by the Confederates in this region before the capture of Chattanooga. On the other hand, as long as he was on the defensive, Johnston had the advantage of position, and as we shall see, the country abounded in positions with

strong defensive possibilities. He had a small army of slaves throwing up earthworks between Dalton and Atlanta, so none of his men need be detached for the purpose. Furthermore, his line of supplies ran through a friendly country and required few troops to guard it.

The Region about Dalton and Resaca

The Confederate position at Dalton was strong and well chosen. It is a railroad junction with roads leading to Chattanooga and Knoxville. Westward a short distance is a high, steep ridge of quartzite whose name, "Rocky Face Ridge," tells the story of its character. Near Dalton the ridge is pierced by the ravine of Mill Creek, a wild, rocky, picturesque gorge, with ridges projecting from the sides. The railroad passed through

this gorge and then on down the valley. The Confederates had mounted batteries on these ridges and had dammed Mill Creek, making the gorge impassable. Their works extended along the ridge and over the hills north of Dalton. Nature and military science had made the place almost impregnable.

Sherman determined the enemy's position by a light attack and decided that the place was too strong to be carried by assault. Instead he tried a movement which became typical of the campaign. Engaging the enemy with a portion of his army, with the rest he threatened Johnston's flank and line of supplies. This movement was a logical sequence of three factors: the widening valley, which made flank attacks possible; the fact that the Confederate army was dependent upon a single line of railroad for its supplies; and of course the preponderance of numbers in Sherman's army.

Southward in Rocky Face Ridge, about ten miles from Mill Creek Gap is Snake Creek Gap, a narrow defile which the geologists would call a "wind gap," a common feature in the valley ridges from Virginia southward. The name originated from the fact that a cool current of air usually flows through these depressions. The gap was formerly the valley of a creek which flowed across the ridge when the floor of the valley was at a higher level than at present; finally the valley floor on either side was lowered by erosion and weathering faster than the current could cut Rocky Face, and the stream was "bisected," one branch flowing northwestward and the other flowing to the southeast into the Conasauga River. The latter branch is called Snake Creek and gives its name to the ravine.

Either through negligence or lack of troops, Johnston had failed to fortify this door to the valley in his rear and Sherman, holding the enemy's army by a brisk attack along his lines, sent a corps through Snake Creek Gap to threaten or capture the fortifications which the Confederates had thrown up near the hamlet of Resaca during the previous winter. Sherman then leaving a force in front of the enemy strong enough to delay Johnston if he should attempt to move northward, took most of his army through Snake Creek Gap. The Confederate commander could not allow this concentration in his rear and quickly retreated into his intrenchments on a small plateau near Resaca. In anticipation of such an emergency roads had previously been cleared between Dalton and Resaca, so the movement was quickly made.

The turning of Resaca and the passage of the Etowah: Sherman "felt" of the Confederate position by a general attack, which was unsuccessful so far as carrying the position, but on Johnston's left a hill was carried and held, which commanded the railroad and wagon bridge across the river.

Sherman had secured a ford below the town and had advanced troops across the river and Johnston, fearing an investment of his army, crossed the Oostanaula by night, burning the bridge behind him.

From Resaca on the campaign was conducted on the Piedmont. It was a cotton growing region and was fairly well cleared. There were no protecting parallel ridges as in the valley, so Sherman hoped to bring on a battle here where there were few natural fortifications for Johnston's use. Johnston seems to have decided to try the issue of battle and took a position at Cassville, but suddenly he changed his mind, led his army across the Etowah and took position on the Allatoona heights. Johnston's critics seem to agree that this was his best chance to try a general battle, since Sherman had divided his army, sending a part to Rome. His reason given for not

Allatoona Pass looking north, Corse's Fort on the left. (Drawing loaned by Century Co.)

fighting was that two of his generals, Hood and Polk, advised against the battle.

Near Allatoona the Etowah breaks through a worn down range of hills that were once part of the Appalachians. The railroad crosses the river near here and then bears to the southeastward. Thus the pass is the door to the region traversed by the railroad to Atlanta. Sherman had visited here in 1844 and had formed so high an opinion of its strength that he did not attempt to carry the position.

The Union commander continued his plan of moving by his right flank, but undertook a more elaborate campaign. His aim was to strike the railroad near Marietta, but since the railroad bears to the southeastward, the army would have to carry its provisions until a base could be secured. A base of supplies was established at Kingston, a town near the Etowah, where a branch railroad led to Rome, an important manufacturing town.

From thence the Federal plan was to move south to Dallas and then east along the watershed between the Etowah and Chattahoochee to the railroad. Johnston promptly met his adversary and chose a strong position near Dallas at New Hope church, where roads led to Atlanta and Marietta. The Union army had come across the country with only two days' rations. The occasion, therefore, demanded prompt action. An assault was ordered, but it was repulsed with heavy loss. Sherman now changed his tactics. The country was so wooded that in an hour after

Breastworks near New Hope church, showing forested condition of country. (Drawing loaned by Century Co.)

reaching a position, troops could strongly entrench themselves by falling trees, and soldiers behind breastworks were said to be able to repulse three or four times their number of assailants. The Federal troops would advance as far as possible and then entrench their position. Holding his own entrenchments and constantly skirmishing, Sherman extended his works eastward and Johnston was obliged to meet each extension to avoid being taken in flank.

Allatoona had been evacuated and was taken possession of by Federal cavalry under Stoneman. The railroad was repaired to this place, which was made a secondary distributing point to the troops. The two hostile lines kept stretching out their entrenchments until Johnston became con-

vinced that his line was too thin to be maintained and he withdrew to a second line of works which had been prepared in advance.

The country about Marietta is interesting to the geologist because of many examples of residual hills or "monadnocks," as they are called. Lost Mountain, Kenesaw Mountain and Pine Mountain, near Marietta, and Stone Mountain, near Atlanta, are famous monadnocks. From the greater resistance of their rocks or from their remoteness from active erosion or perhaps from both causes, these masses have weathered less than their neighbors and stand overlooking the wreckage of the former mountains of the Piedmont plateau. Their military advantage is obvious and Johnston utilized them in his new line of defense, which included Lost and Pine Mountains, a line about ten miles long. However, before his line

Kenesaw Mountain from the southeast. (Photograph by J. E. Murray, Marietta, Ga.)

was invested, the Confederate commander abandoned his line, rightly judging it to be too long for his forces to support.

Another line was in waiting and this being smaller was well manned. The center rested on Kenesaw Mountain while the flanks in either direction protected Marietta, which was a manufacturing town. Sherman, in investing the lines, found them very strong and well protected against assault. He could continue his flanking tactics and probably compel Johnston to retire. But he formed a bold plan. If he could attack the Confederate lines and carry the center he could probably demoralize Johnston's army then and there and end the campaign. Experience had shown that that part of a line which nature had marked as apparently impregnable is often defended by a small force, which can be overcome rather easily. At Chattanooga, Lookout mountain was a fairly easy capture for Hooker, and at Gettysburg, but for the accidental presence of a force that was coming to the field of battle, the Confederates would have taken Little Round Top, the key to the position. Thinking the risk worth while, Sherman hazarded

an attack on all Johnston's lines but especially directed a blow at Kenesaw. Johnston was too wary a commander to be caught. The position was fully defended and the Federals withdrew with a heavy loss. Sherman was preparing to outflank the enemy, when his opponent, not caring to wait for the movement to be executed, retired and did not make a permanent stand until his army was south of the Chattahoochee.

Map of the region included in the campaign about Marietta. The dotted lines show the successive positions of the principal Confederate intrenchments

From Dallas to Marietta had been a unique campaign and the methods of warfare little to Sherman's liking. It had been a continuous skirmish, often, as he says, "without a dozen of the enemy being in sight." His average daily loss had been two hundred.

The Chattahoochee River runs several miles northwest of Atlanta: it is fordable in several places and is crossed by the railroad near the mouth of Peach Tree Creek, a sluggish tributary, flowing for some distance some-

what perpendicular to the river. Johnson made his stand on the hills south of the Chattahoochee, but did not guard the fords and crossings. Soon the enemy had a force across threatening his right flank. The Confederates retired to a strong line of works south of Peach Tree Creek.

The Federal army was now in sight of its goal, the city of Atlanta. The exact vicinity of Atlanta did not, like Chattanooga, have strategic advantage, but the region roundabout was extremely important. The Appalachians, broadening as they extended southward, constituted a barrier which up to 1880 was not crossed by a railroad south of Virginia. The commerce between the South Atlantic States and the west followed two routes: one led through the Great Valley, by way of Lexington, to Virginia, and the other around the mountains by way of Atlanta. The city was a center of communication for east, south and west. The plateau in Georgia and Alabama yielded iron and coal and the city was then, as today, the center of important iron industries. When the Union soldiers looked over the enemy's works they could see the smoking chimneys of factories that were turning out materials for the Confederate armies. There was a network of important manufacturing towns around Atlanta, among which were Rome and Marietta. Heretofore Georgia had been considered the very heart of the Confederacy. Its industries had gone on unaffected by hostile armies. Because of its seclusion the principal military prison of the South had been located at Andersonville, in the southwestern part of the state.

The city of Atlanta lies on the watershed between the Chattahoochee and Ocmulgee Rivers, the watershed at this point being parallel to the former river. The streams flow in opposite directions from the city. Those entering the Chattahoochee have cut steep ravines, which would be perpendicular to a line of defense, making it difficult to construct works and hard to move troops quickly from one place to another. To the eastward along the watershed was the railroad leading to Richmond. Southward a single road ran about five miles to East Point, where it branched, one branch going to Montgomery and the other to Macon.

Johnston states that in the early stages of the campaign he did not risk battle, as a victory would have meant little and a defeat would have been disastrous. With each retreat his enemy was drawn farther from his base of supplies and was obliged to detach more and more men to guard his line to Chattanooga. He had hoped that Sherman in some of his flank movements would divide his army so that it could be attacked and the parts beaten in detail. Now it seemed to Johnston that his opportunity had arrived. Sherman's center was more or less stationary; it was necessarily

near the railroad. Johnston planned to hold his strong works in front of the enemy with a comparatively small number of men and when the enemy attempted a flank movement to pounce upon him with a superior force.

Sherman studied his problem. By moving to his right he could threaten Atlanta's southern railroad connections and compel the enemy to operate in a country unfavorable for defense. But he would stretch out

Map of the vicinity of Atlanta

his own line and imperil his connection with the ever necessary railroad. Moving by his left flank he would have less distance to cover, but the streams ran parallel to the enemy's position. The latter was the line of operations he chose: it was the movement which Johnston had anticipated and as we have seen, was planning to resist.

But Sherman's plans were made easier by President Davis. The Confederate government had become tired of Johnston's "Fabian policy" and

he was replaced by General Hood, who had commanded a division of Johnston's army and had severely criticised his chief's defensive tactics. This change was a cause of rejoicing among the Union officers. It was understood that the patient, alert parrying of Johnston was to be replaced by an "aggressive" policy, for which Sherman had so wished and had tried to compel from his "astute adversary." The *post bellum* judgment seems to be that Johnston had conducted a wise and masterly campaign. Indeed, the most unstinted praise of his ability has come from his antagonist, who says in his memoirs: "No officer or soldier under me will question the generalship of Joseph E. Johnston. His retreats were timely and in good

Map of the region included in the Atlanta campaigns

order and he left nothing behind." Another officer laughingly complains that "in all his retreats Johnston didn't even leave a mule behind."

In accordance with the policy imposed upon him Hood sallied out and attacked the Union left flank, but was repulsed with heavy loss. He then withdrew his army into the intrenchments about the city. McPherson's corps, protected by cavalry, continued the movement eastward and destroyed several miles of the railroad leading to Richmond and Sherman's first purpose had been accomplished. Taking fifteen days' rations he now began to move by his right flank in order to cut the railroads south of Atlanta. Hood fiercely attacked again, but was repulsed. The Union line

pushed south, destroyed the railroads and Hood was forced to abandon Atlanta.

The apparent purpose of the campaign had been accomplished, but Sherman's ulterior purpose was to destroy or capture the army before him and then to march up the coast upon Lee. However, Hood's army of forty thousand men was very far from being destroyed. It was a constant menace upon Sherman's long line of supplies. The primary base was at Louis-

Map showing region included in Hood's campaign after the fall of Atlanta. His line of march is shown by the dotted line

ville; from thence to Nashville the distance was 185 miles; from Nashville to Chattanooga was 151 miles and from thence to Atlanta was 137 miles, in all nearly 500 miles, of which 300 lay through hostile territory. Every bridge, culvert and trestle had to be guarded and every train was accompanied by a repair force. One hundred and forty-five cars a day must arrive at Atlanta to maintain the army.

Sherman's position was somewhat precarious. Every effort was made to accumulate at Atlanta sufficient supplies to maintain his army for a

considerable time, even if the railroad should be broken. The enemy was fully alive to the importance of the Chattanooga road and soon Hood put his army in motion, crossed the Chattahoochee and the army in light marching order was soon in the vicinity of Marietta. Sherman followed with a portion of his army and from the heights of Kenesaw saw the smoke of the burning railroad twenty miles northward. Hood's main army was near Dallas, but a strong Confederate force was sent to capture Allatoona. Gen. Corse's there made a strong, successful resistance. It is interesting to note that the signalling between Generals Corse and Sherman was the basis for the well known song, "Hold the Fort for I am Coming."

Hood withdrew at the approach of the Union army and, turning northward, crossed the Coosa. The Oostanaula, a tributary of the Coosa from the north, was swollen by recent rains and protected his right flank. He moved upon Resaca but was not able to capture the place. Sherman was getting uncomfortably close and Hood, following Sherman's path of the previous campaign, turned west from Resaca through Snake Creek Gap and Ship's Gap and entered the Chattanooga valley. After the retreating army filed through the gaps, trees were felled across them so that pursuit was slow. The Confederate army, turning southward, proceeded to Gadsden, Ga. It was protected in the retreat by two physiographic factors: Taylor's Ridge on the east was an effective wall between him and the enemy, while the general southwest trend of the valley carried his army farther and farther from Atlanta. The campaign had been brilliant but fruitless. The broken railroad was soon repaired and trains were again running to Atlanta.

Sherman now had three courses open to him: he could hold Atlanta as a base and send out raiding forces into the surrounding country; or he could follow Hood in the hope of destroying the Confederate army; or, if Hood could be disposed of, he could carry out his cherished project of marching to the Atlantic seaboard.

Again the Confederates did precisely what Sherman wished. Hood started for Tennessee, hoping that his enemy would follow. The Confederates left the valley and crossed the Tennessee River at Florence Shoals, about one hundred and fifty miles below Chattanooga. Sherman detached General Thomas with a force strong enough to hold Hood's army and at once set about his famous march, first destroying the railroad from Chattanooga to Resaca, thus releasing the troops who were guarding the line and making it useless to the enemy.

From now on Sherman's primary object was to cripple Lee's army, which was besieged at Petersburg, Va., to cut off his supplies and finally

to march northward and, if need be, attack in conjunction with Grant's forces. Three routes were possible; by Augusta to Charleston; south-eastward to Savannah, or southward to some Gulf port. Sherman so maneuvered that the enemy was uncertain as to his route until he was well started.

The army of about sixty thousand was divided into wings which marched on parallel roads, covering a front of fifteen miles or more. About ten days' rations were taken in wagons, but these were rarely drawn upon. For once a Union army found itself in a country on which it could live. President Davis had aided materially in obtaining forage for the horses and men. Cotton was unmarketable because of the blockade and the Confederate president had issued a proclamation urging the people to plant corn instead of cotton. The appeal was heeded and as a result there was plenty of corn and fodder for man and horse. There was practically no opposition and the armies marched on the average about fifteen miles a day. Upon reaching the vicinity of Millen, Ga., the armies passed from the Plateau to the Coastal Plain. The soil became sandy and less fertile and supplies were scarcer. On the river bottoms rice and rice straw were foraged instead of corn and corn fodder. The food supplies in the wagons were drawn upon and well nigh exhausted, and had it not been for the junction with the fleet at Savannah and absence of resistance to the march, the Union army would have been seriously embarrassed for food. The falling off of plentiful supplies on the Coastal Plain compelled the Federal officers to dismiss the slaves who followed in large numbers.

The entire march was devoid of important engagements. On Christmas day, 1864, Sherman reported the evacuation of Savannah. The movement had been at once *felt* by the Confederate soldiers in Petersburg in their reduced rations. A path sixty miles wide had been cleared of anything a hostile army could use. Atlanta had been captured, the Confederacy had been again sundered and the purposes of the great march had been accomplished.

HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY

History is full of the great movements of humanity that have developed outbursts of intellectual development—indeed it is these same movements that constitute history. And no matter what may seem to be the intermediate cause, the real motive may be traced always to the same incentive—geographic environment.—*J. W. Redway, in New Basis of Geography.*