

Episode 232: Johnston and Sherman battle in North Carolina

Week of March 15-March 21, 1865

After cutting a path of devastation through South Carolina, Union forces under William Sherman entered North Carolina on March 8, 1865. Sherman divided his army into two wings, one under Major General Henry Slocum and the other under Major General Oliver Howard. By March 13, both wings were marching toward Goldsboro, about fifty miles southeast of Raleigh.

In opposition to Sherman's 60,000 men were about 22,000 Confederates under Joseph Johnston. Confederate commander Robert E. Lee had ordered Johnston to gather whatever Confederate forces could be rallied and to drive Sherman out of the Carolinas. Lee had his hands full trying to hold off Ulysses S. Grant's army around Petersburg, Virginia. To take on this formidable task, Johnston had pulled together men from Virginia, Tennessee, Georgia, South Carolina and Florida.

Johnston decided to attack the Union wing under Slocum before they could reunite with the other Union force under Howard. On March 16, Confederates under William Hardee attacked Slocum's troops on the grounds of a historic home called Oak Grove. After temporarily pushing back Slocum's troops, Union reinforcements arrived and Hardee withdrew. The conflict, called the Battle of Averasborough, cost the Confederates 700 men they could ill afford to lose.

Undaunted, Johnston attacked Slocum again on the afternoon of March 19, this time just south of the town of Bentonville. Slocum at first thought he was facing only a small cavalry detachment and let Sherman know that he did not require aid from the other Union wing. As a result, the small Confederate army drove the Union troops back in confusion. By the time

Slocum had checked the Confederate advance, night was falling and both sides began to entrench. The valiant Southern attack was a last moment of glory for the decimated Confederate army. As one observer noted:

“It looked like a picture and at our distance was truly beautiful ... But it was a painful sight to see how close their battle flags were together, regiments being scarcely larger than companies and a division not much larger than a regiment should be.”

By the next day, Howard’s entire wing had arrived at the battlefield and Johnston was outnumbered three to one. During the rest of March 20 there was only a little skirmishing between the two armies and on March 21, a small attack was made on the Confederate left flank and made progress before Sherman inexplicably called the men back. During the night of March 21, Johnston wisely pulled his men away from the battlefield and retreated toward Raleigh.

Sherman would later write that he regretted not being more aggressive at Bentonville as he might have ended the Carolina Campaign then and there. As it was, Sherman continued on the Goldsborough and united both his wings with other Union forces. His intention was to then move toward Petersburg and assist Grant in taking care of Lee’s army. But before he could do so, he would receive word on Lee’s surrender at Appomattox Court House. He would then begin to move toward Raleigh and finishing off Johnston’s force. Johnston, however, realizing the inevitable, would surrender to Sherman shortly after Appomattox. The Battle of Bentonville would be the last serious fighting in the Carolinas Campaign.

Sherman and Johnston developed a deep mutual respect during the war and became close friends after the war ended. Johnston attended Sherman’s funeral on a cold rainy day in 1891 and out of respect for his friend he refused to wear his hat. He subsequently developed pneumonia and would die several weeks later.