

Battle of Bentonville ^[1]

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by Ronnie W. Faulkner, 2006

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The largest [Civil War](#) ^[6] land engagement in North Carolina, the Battle of Bentonville took place during 19-21 Mar. 1865 in rural [Johnston County](#) ^[7]. The encounter was one of the Confederacy's last attempts to defeat the Union army before the South capitulated. With reports that Maj. Gen. [William T. Sherman](#) ^[8]'s 60,000-man army was marching toward Goldsboro in two columns, Gen. [Joseph E. Johnston](#) ^[9] concentrated about 21,000 men near the community of Bentonville. His aim was to defeat the Union left wing before it could be reinforced by the right. Johnston thus hoped to prevent or delay Sherman's junction with Maj. Gen. John M. Schofield's Federal forces at Goldsboro.

[Confederate](#) ^[10] cavalry skirmished with Federal troops on 18 March, impeding their advance while Johnston moved toward Bentonville from Smithfield and Avasboro. On 19 March Johnston deployed his troops in a sickle-shaped formation across and above the Goldsboro road. On the left was Gen. [Braxton Bragg](#) ^[11]'s command, Hoke's Division, which included the 17- and 18-year-olds of the North Carolina Junior Reserves; it was the largest brigade in Johnston's army. On the right were the troops led by Lt. Gen. William J. Hardee, most of them veterans of the Army of Tennessee.



An engraving from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, 22 Apr. 1865, showing Bentonville the morning after the battle. North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library.

On the morning of 19 March, Confederate cavalry was again attacked by advancing Union foragers but repulsed them. At 7:00 a.m. the Union left wing under Maj. Gen. Henry W. Slocum began to advance, but it soon encountered the same Confederate cavalry that had stalled the foraging details. Acting on a false report that the main Confederate force was near [Raleigh](#) ^[12], the Union left wing brushed aside the cavalry and then came under heavy fire. After the Confederates repulsed a Union probing attack, three gray-clad deserters came through the Union lines and informed Slocum that he was confronting Johnston's entire army. Undeceived, Slocum decided to dig in and summon reinforcements, a portion of which arrived by 2:00 p.m. In Johnston's words, his troop deployments "consumed a weary time," so the Confederate attack did not begin until 3:15 p.m. One Union officer stated that "the onward sweep of the rebel lines was like the waves of the ocean, resistless." The Federal left broke and fell back in confusion. Instead of taking advantage of the gaps in the remaining Federal lines, the Confederate units either attempted a frontal assault or became disorganized and failed to attack at all. During the attacks, however, fresh Union troops came up to meet them. Reinforcements likewise bolstered the collapsed Federal left, which had fallen back to a position anchored by four Union batteries. After several determined strikes failed to budge the Federal defenders, the Confederates withdrew to their original lines at sundown.

When word of the battle reached Sherman late on 19 March, he sent the Union right wing under Maj. Gen. Oliver O. Howard to Slocum's support. Johnston redeployed his lines into a V to prevent being outflanked and to guard his only route of retreat. By 4:00 p.m. on 20 March, most of the Union right wing had reached Bentonville. Johnston was forced to deploy cavalry on his flanks to give the appearance of a strong front. Uncertain of Johnston's strength, Sherman decided against a general attack and instead ordered his subordinates to probe the Confederate defensive line. The Federal commander expected Johnston to retreat under cover of darkness, but dawn the next day revealed that the Confederates still held their entrenchments.

There was more intense skirmishing on 21 March despite the onset of heavy rain. During the afternoon, a Union attack nearly cut off Johnston's line of retreat before being repulsed by a hastily mounted Confederate counterattack. The Rebels thus escaped from Bentonville mainly because Sherman did not launch a general assault. That night the Confederates withdrew, removing as many of the wounded as possible, and returned to Smithfield. Lt. Gen. Wade Hampton's cavalry was ordered to cover the retreat, engaging in lively skirmishing with the Union forces. Total casualties at Bentonville were 1,527 Federals and 2,606 Confederates. After the battle, Sherman resumed the Union march toward Goldsboro, arriving there on 23 March.

References:

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From:

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1 January 2006 | Faulkner, Ronnie W.

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