



Bentonville Battleground  
State Historic Site

NORTH CAROLINA

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STATE DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY

Raleigh, N. C.

## Bentonville Battleground

*Here the Confederate Army concentrated and made its last effort to halt the advance of General Sherman.*

The Battle of Bentonville, March 19-21, 1865, was the last full-scale action of the Civil War in which the Confederate Army was able to choose the ground and make the attack and the largest battle of the war on North Carolina soil. It was also the only Confederate attempt to turn back Sherman after he left Atlanta. Not until Bentonville were the scattered forces of the lower South finally concentrated against Sherman's advancing veterans.

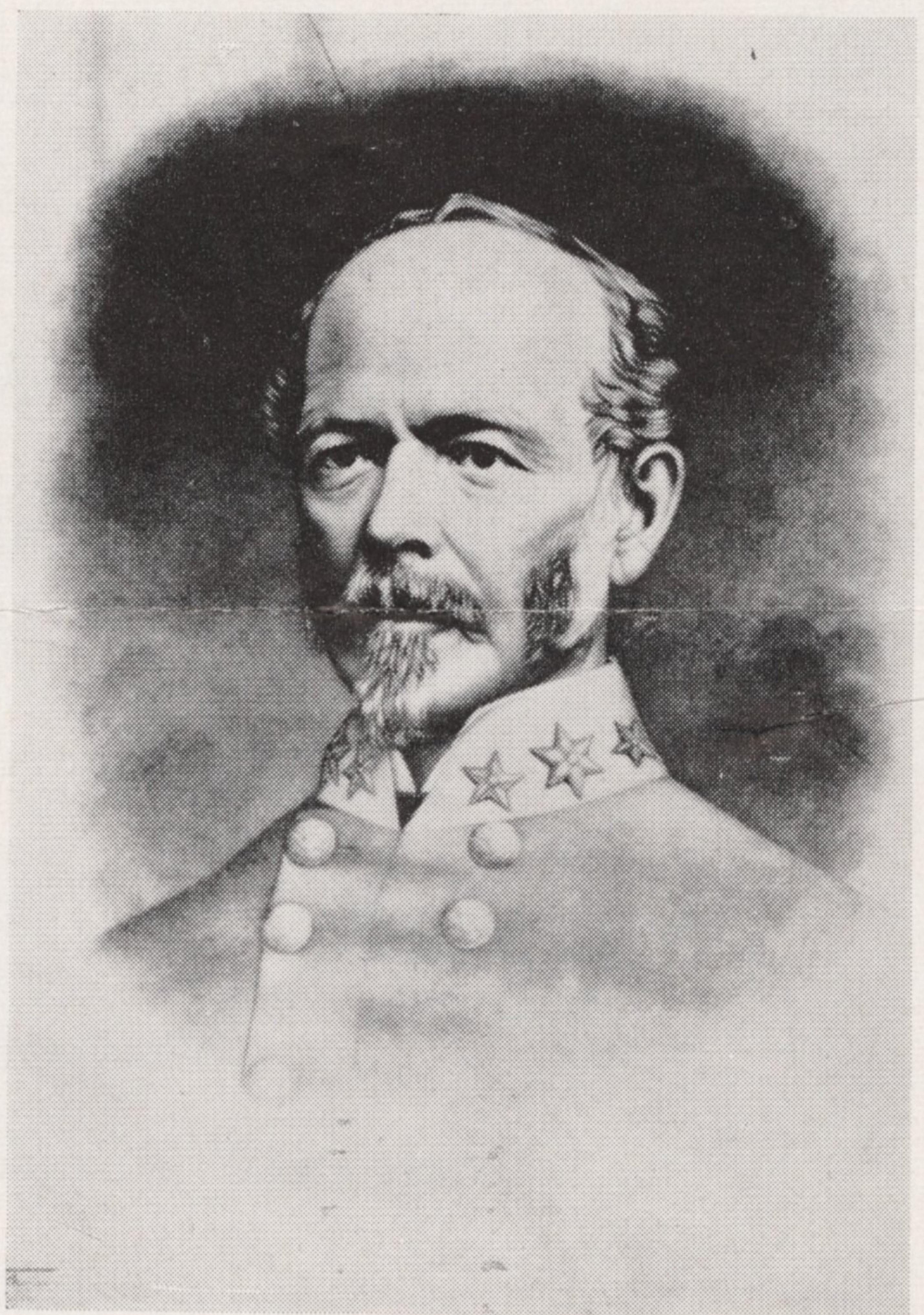
Sherman had met little resistance on his march northward. Leaving Savannah in January, 1865, his

forces moved through South Carolina, capturing Columbia and devastating the countryside. Charleston had also fallen; now only North Carolina lay between him and union with Grant in Virginia.

The Confederate forces in the Carolinas were widely scattered. General P. G. T. Beauregard had a small force at Charlotte, the garrison of Charleston under Lieutenant General William J. Hardee was at Cheraw, South Carolina, and General Braxton Bragg's troops from Wilmington, which had fallen in January, were at Goldsboro. It was General Joseph E. Johnston's diffi-



GEN. WILLIAM T. SHERMAN



GEN. JOSEPH E. JOHNSTON

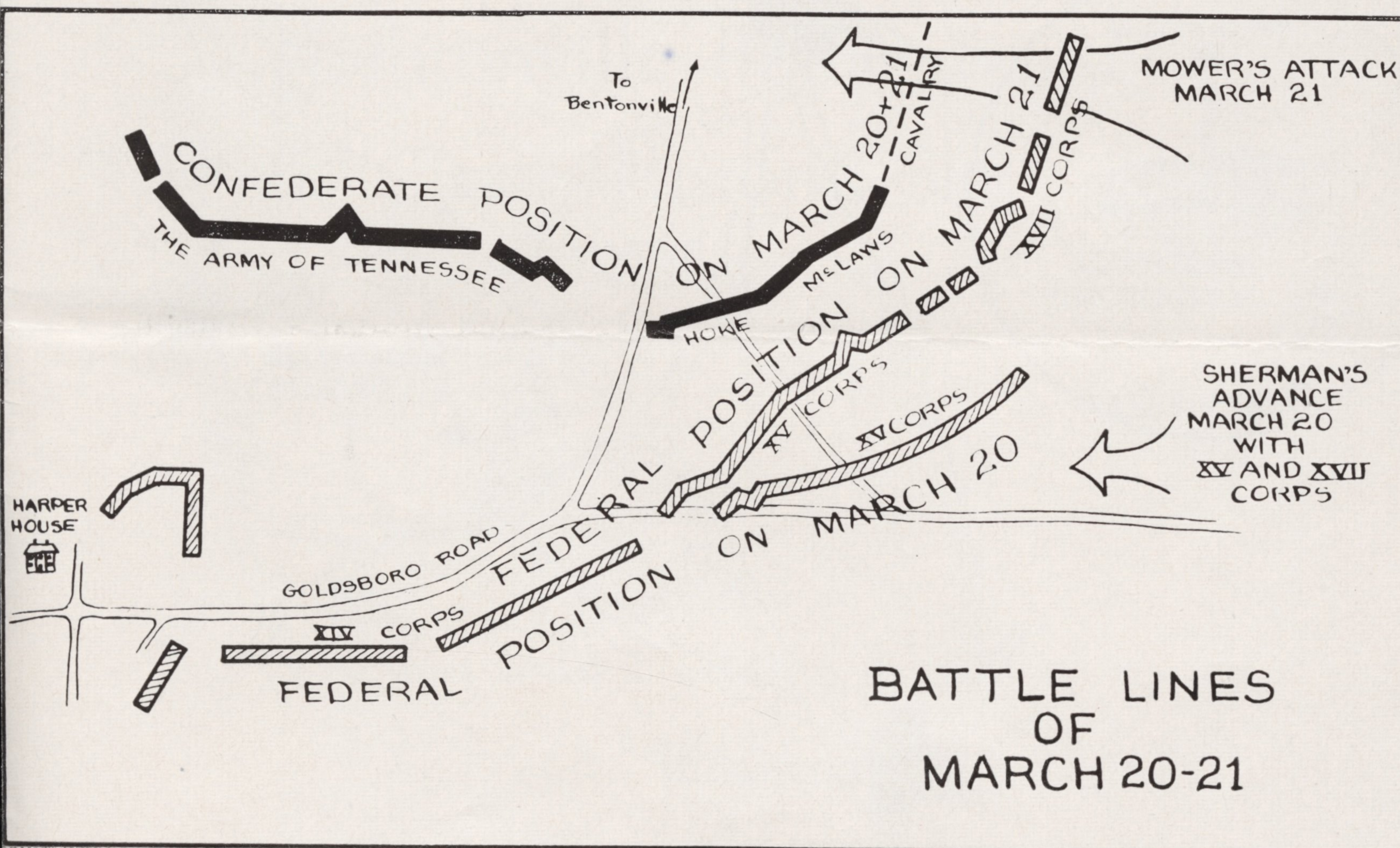
cult task to unite these forces, at best less than half as many as Sherman's 60,000 men, and to seek to prevent Sherman from combining his army with that of Grant. His only prospect for success lay in the possibility of finding Sherman's Army divided, enabling him to defeat it piecemeal. This chance, however, was remote.

#### THE BATTLE BEGINS

Sherman had hoped to march his army in a compact mass from Columbia to Goldsboro, where supplies awaited him. The miserable condition of the roads forced him, however, to disperse his troops and on March 18 Johnston learned that Sherman's Right Wing was approximately half a day's march in advance of his Left. This presented the opportunity Johnston had been looking for and he moved his army

to a point near Bentonville and prepared for battle.

The following morning Sherman sat on his horse at the intersection of the present North Carolina Route 701 with the Erwin-Goldsboro Road, listening to the picket firing ahead. Deciding it was only cavalry, he rode away to join his Right Wing on another road. Meanwhile, Lieutenant General Wade Hampton's cavalry offered stiff resistance to the Federal advance in order to permit Johnston to deploy his forces and throw up earthworks. Despite the sharp fighting, the Federals did not as yet suspect that Johnston's entire army was before them. Finding Confederate works across the road, Brigadier General William P. Carlin, commanding the leading Federal division, deployed his forces





Federal XX Corps Artillery in Action, March 19. From *Harper's Weekly*, April 15, 1865.

for action. An attack was ordered but it recoiled before the heavy fire from Johnston's entrenched troops. Now the Federals realized that they were fighting infantry and that they faced the prospect of a real battle.

#### THE CONFEDERATE CHARGE

The Federal assault, although repelled, had delayed Johnston's plans for a frontal attack upon the enemy. It was not until 3:15 P.M. that he was able to launch his main charge. The Confederates moved off with beautiful precision, dashing over two lines of Federal works, completely scattering Carlin's Division and taking three pieces of artillery. All of the Federal forces north of the Goldsboro Road and a brigade and a half below it were swept away. The charge was completely successful in the center but Johnston failed to attain his objectives on the left and right. On the right, a withering fire from artillery and muskets of the entrenched XX Corps halted the advance of Lieutenant General Hardee's and Brigadier General William B. Taliaferro's Confed-

erates. On the left, in the dense thickets south of the road, two brigades under Major General Robert F. Hoke failed to dislodge Major General James D. Morgan's Federal Division.

#### FIGHTING BELOW THE GOLDSBORO ROAD

The heaviest of this fighting was below the Goldsboro Road. By 4:30 P. M. the Confederate forces which had crossed the Goldsboro Road were scattered in the thick pine forest and undergrowth and ceased to act as a unit. While Hardee and Taliaferro vainly attacked the XX Federal Corps and artillery, the Army of Tennessee drove into the woods behind Morgan's Division. Morgan's men were forced to engage the Confederates from both sides of their works, fighting off the Army of Tennessee to the front and Hoke's Division to the rear. At this crisis, a fresh brigade of the XX Corps advanced through the woods and swamps to Morgan's relief. These reinforcements succeeded in cutting off some of the Confederates farthest down in the woods and in stabilizing the Federal

line. The Confederates fell back above the Goldsboro Road, where sharp, inconclusive firing continued.

#### THE EVENING OF THE NINETEENTH

About sunset some fresh Confederate brigades moved onto the field but it was now too late for them to influence the course of battle. Firing continued until nightfall, when both sides began settling into positions for the night. By 11 P. M. the Confederates had returned to the lines occupied by them during the morning. The great Confederate effort, apparently a success, had really failed to accomplish its object—the destruction of a major part of Sherman's Army.

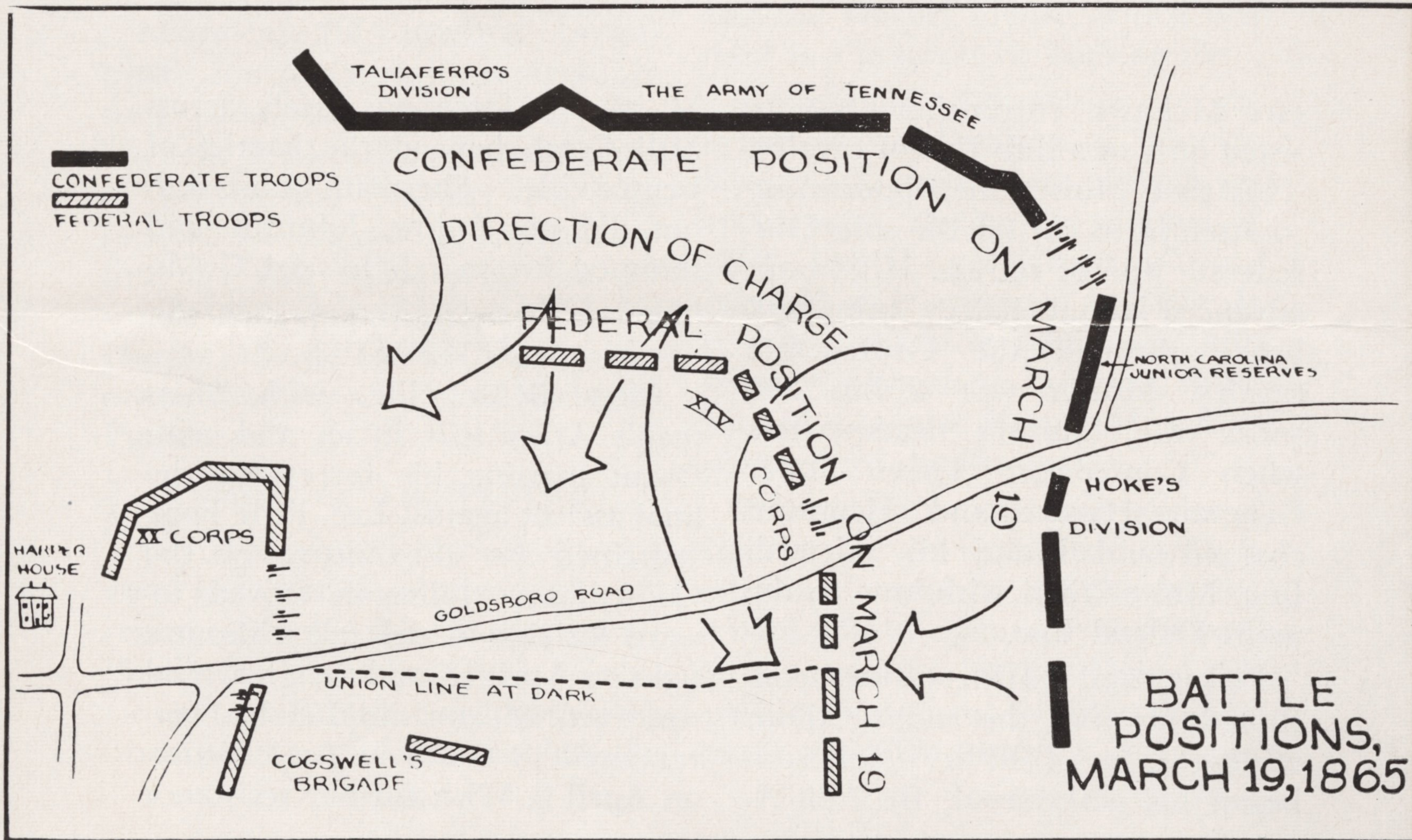
#### MONDAY, MARCH TWENTIETH

By dawn one division of Federal reinforcements had reached the field and Sherman's entire Right

Wing, about 30,000 men, was approaching the battlefield. Near noon Hoke's Division abandoned its line across the Goldsboro Road and took up a new position north of the road and parallel to it, extending one mile northeast. By 4 P. M. Sherman's Left and Right wings were united and he formed a line across the road. The Confederate and Federal armies now faced each other across two long, relatively static lines.

#### TUESDAY, MARCH TWENTY-FIRST

The Confederates remained in position behind their works while the Federal skirmish line exerted pressure upon them. The only serious attack of the day was made by Maj. Gen. Joseph A. Mower's Division from the extreme Federal right. The Confederate line east of Hoke's and Major General Lafay-





The Harper House, November, 1958.

ette McLaws' entrenchments consisted only of a thin line of cavalry. This gave Mower the opportunity to attempt to cut off the sole Confederate line of retreat. His troops advanced about half a mile and broke through the Confederate cavalry. Mower was within 200 yards of Johnston's headquarters when Confederate forces under Generals Hardee and Hampton charged and broke his skirmish line. Mower then withdrew to the main Federal line.

Picket and artillery fire continued far into the night. About midnight, in a cold rain, Johnston began his withdrawal. By 7:30 A.

M. all his force was safely across Mill Creek beyond the hamlet of Bentonville. Sherman observed, but did not follow, Johnston and resumed his march toward Goldsboro.

#### AFTERMATH

After Bentonville, with Sherman's Army still intact and with Grant massing his forces for the final assault against Lee, little hope remained for the future of the Confederacy. Johnston moved toward Raleigh, which fell without a fight on April 13, and then marched westward. Meanwhile, Lee had surrendered to Grant at Appomattox on April 9. With further resistance