



## Joseph E. Johnston, Soldier



### Introducing Mr. Johnston

When the Civil War broke out, many of his military colleagues expected much of Joseph E. Johnston. By 1861, he had already been battle-hardened. A native of Virginia, Johnston attended the military academy at West Point, graduating with Robert E. Lee, future commander of the Army of Northern Virginia. A few years later, the young soldier served in the Black Hawk War of 1832, then against the Seminoles in Florida in 1838. In the Mexican War, Johnston was wounded twice and was soon thereafter promoted to colonel. By the outbreak of the Civil War, “Old Joe” was quartermaster-general of the United States Army.

### Early War Experience



When war broke out in 1861, Johnston resigned his post in favor of the Confederacy, and was appointed Commanding General of the Army of the Shenandoah. Later that year when the North launched its first major offensive, the general evaded a superior force under Union General Patterson to join with Confederate General Beauregard at the First Battle of Manassas, and played a crucial role in the Rebel victory there. Unfortunately for the Confederacy, Johnston quickly developed a combative relationship with the Southern president, Jefferson Davis. The first incident began when the first five full generals of the South were announced. Although Johnston technically should have been the highest ranking officer in the army, he found himself fourth on the list, passed over in favor of officers he had outranked before the war. The tension and distrust between president and general would continue throughout the conflict, and did much to hamper Johnston’s command.

#### Commanding the West

After recovering from a wound he suffered at the Battle of Seven Pines, in 1862 “Old Joe” was given command of the Department of the West, an area that encompassed Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, and parts of Louisiana, North Carolina, and Georgia. When Vicksburg was under siege, Johnston

was heavily pressured to relieve the city, despite his small numbers. Although Johnston ordered the commander of the Confederate garrison, Lieutenant General John C. Pemberton, to attack in conjunction with his forces, the former refused. Without these men, attack was impractical. Johnston next ordered Pemberton to retreat and save his army from capture. Pemberton had, however, been ordered by President Davis to hold the city. As a result, the city was eventually forced to capitulate in 1863, and control of the Mississippi river, along with 30,000 Confederates, fell into the hands of the Union. Davis blamed the Southern defeat on Johnston’s inaction. Some thought the general too cautious or timid to be effective.

#### A Likeable Leader

Nevertheless, Johnston was chosen to replace General Braxton Bragg as commander of the Army of Tennessee. The army had suffered numerous defeats under its former commander. Its morale was low, its ranks were thinned, and it was inadequately supplied with food and clothing. The new commander however, was popular with the officers and men, and did much to restore the army to a formidable fighting force. Soon he became affectionately known to his men as “Old Joe.”



General Braxton Bragg



Jefferson Davis



## The Atlanta Campaign

Johnston is most famous as commander of Confederate forces during the Atlanta Campaign of 1864. Atlanta was a key city in the South, as it was a rail road hub and vital industrial center in a predominantly agricultural society. With Northern presidential elections nearing, it was crucial for the Lincoln administration that Union armies make progress, as the war in Virginia had bogged down. Seizing Atlanta would severely undermine Southern morale and reinvigorate Northern citizens who were tiring of the war.

The campaign began in early May. Leading the Federal army in this campaign was one of the North's most skillful generals, William Tecumseh Sherman. As Sherman heavily outnumbered Johnston, the campaign was characterized by a series of defensive battles and tactical retreats by the latter with both armies slowly drawing closer to Atlanta. By taking advantage of natural features such as Kennesaw Mountain, Johnston created strong defensive positions that allowed his troops to inflict more casualties than they received. As a result, Sherman relied on flanking maneuvers to force Johnston out of his

strong positions. By July 16th, the armies were just outside Atlanta. Johnston wanted to prolong the campaign as much as possible to avoid risking scarce resources and deny his opponent the political benefits of an outright, dramatic victory. To some, Johnston's withdrawals looked like defeatism. Jefferson Davis demanded offensive action; thus, Johnston was relieved of his command for having "failed to arrest the advance of the enemy to the vicinity of Atlanta." The aggressive Lieutenant-General Hood replaced him. Johnston later claimed that he had planned to fight outside of Atlanta itself, but was denied the opportunity by his dismissal. Many knowledgeable observers believed Johnston's strategy was effective; Union General Grant remarked that, "Johnston acted very wisely; he husbanded his men and saved as much of his territory as he could, without fighting decisive battles in which all might be lost. As Sherman advanced. . . his army became spread out, until, if this had continued, it would have been easy to destroy in detail." Regrettably for Johnston's reputation, he was unable to complete this plan. Hood was defeated, and Atlanta captured.

## End of the War and Post-War Years

The esteem in which Johnston was held by his peers is exemplified by the actions of Robert E. Lee. In 1865, with disaster for the Confederacy rapidly approaching, Lee was named general-in-chief of the

Confederate armies. Knowing Johnston's abilities, he quickly overruled Davis's objections and recalled him as commander of the Army of Tennessee, and all troops in the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida.



Battle of Bentonville

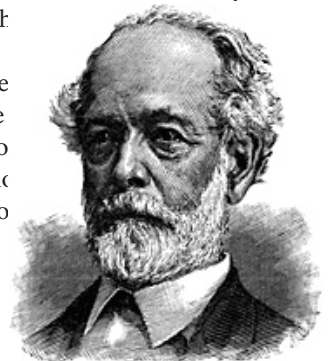
### The Final Battle

Johnston was ordered to oppose Sherman's devastating march through the Carolinas. In one of the last major battles of the war, at Bentonville, the Confederates, separated into two columns, attacked their northern foes where they were. After initial success, Johnston was forced to fall back on the third day in the face of overwhelming numbers. Shortly thereafter he surrendered his army.

### Post-Military Career

After the war, the former officer served as a member of the House of Representatives, and later as Commissioner of Railroads during the Cleveland administration. Johnston published his memoirs, *Narrative of Military Operations*, in 1874. In it, he is highly critical of Jefferson Davis and some of his fellow officers, and attempted to address criticism about his generalship.

Johnston died on March 21, 1891. He fell ill after attending General Sherman's funeral. The two were close friends and Johnston refused to wear a hat while acting as pallbearer. The cold, wet weather caused other attendants concern, and many asked the general to don a hat. He refused, stating, "If I were in his place and he standing here in mine, he would not put on his hat." A month later, Johnston died of pneumonia.



CONFERENCE BETWEEN GENERAL SHERMAN AND GENERAL JOHNSTON.

Conference Between General Sherman and General Johnston

- courtesy of North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

Bulletin created by Lucas Allamon, Franciscan University of Steubenville history student, in cooperation with Kennesaw Mountain National Battlefield Park.