

McPherson's Last Ride

*The Route Taken by the Commander of the Army of the
Tennessee, When He Kept His Rendezvous
With Death; July 22, 1864*

By Wilbur G. Kurtz

Readers of Hillaire Belloc's "Marie Antoinette" cannot fail to remember the account of the last stage of the royal party's flight to Varennes, where Drouet, the postmaster of Ste Menehould, and his companion, Guillame, made that hazardous night ride in the Argonne Forest, and, overtaking the king's carriage almost in the midst of Bouille's army, not only prevented Louis XVI's escape, but changed the entire program of the French Revolution. The incident inspires the Anglo-French author to observe that "a man callous or wearied by study might still discover in the pursuit of History one last delight: the presence in all its record of superhuman irony."

Belloc finds still another delight, for to this memorable incident, he adds a bit of historical research that lifts it to a more intimate level of interest. The author took the trouble to personally examine the ground where these events occurred, and, going beyond the mere recorded details extant, adduced findings that complete the story in all its dimensions. By careful observations of the time element and the lay of the land, Belloc examined the route taken by two ex-dragoons in making the cross-country ride that carried them from the Jacques and Locheres Farms, to Varennes, some moments ahead of the royal carriage.

By process of elimination and deduction, consideration of terrain and obstructions, and the all-important close figuring of minutes, we are convinced that Belloc's findings are correct, and that such episodes are not entirely confined to romances and scenarios. This last stage of the celebrated flight of the king and queen took place on the night of June 21, 1791, and Belloc's researches were over an hundred years later!

Not of such outstanding general interest as the above, but pertinent to any narrative of military operations around Atlanta, in 1864, is the episode of General James B. McPherson's ride from the Augustus Hurt house, then standing on what is now known as Copenhill, to the Battlefield where the Army of the Tennessee was meeting the surprise attack from Hardee's Corps to the woods of East Atlanta.

Recorded history usually ignores much that is regarded as trivial detail. It is only the curious camp-followers in the march of events, who garner facts frequently styled

“the dross of history,” but to these “trifling chroniclers,” as John Hay kindly calls them, we owe much that makes history interesting and entertaining. So in the published narrative of the July days of 1864, when two mighty armies battled for the possession of Atlanta, the reader is told that when General McPherson heard the firing on the left of his line, he mounted his horse and rode from Sherman’s headquarters to see for himself what was going on. Not a line in the official records tells what route he took in making this ride. This is not unusual. Front line activities are more important, and assaults, withdrawals or shifts are carefully reported, but rear-line movements among field and staff officers are individual matters, and only occasionally mentioned.

But in this case, the ground covered is not now in an area of farmsteads or a wooded wilderness, as it was then, and as much as the battlefield area west of Kenesaw Mountain still remains, Atlanta has spread out and covered nearly every square foot of terrain in question. Paved streets, shaded avenues, business districts and all manner of residences from the stately domicile to the negro cottage occupy the once war-torn plantations, the occasional dusty highway, and criss-crossing of field roads.

In addition to accurate knowledge of places where past history was made, the monuments, if any, however eloquent and monitory, bear scant relation thereto, amid changed and contrasting environment.

There is such a monument to General McPherson, and though it bears his name, nought else is vouchsafed. Even though it recited that here was the end of the general’s last ride; that here the commanding general of the Army of the Tennessee was shot from his horse we would still fail to visualize the event as it happened. Placed at the intersection of what is now two streets, with peaceful residences about, we completely lose the background of narrow roadway cut through the tall pines, the pushing lines of smoke-begrimed men, the rattle of musketry and the shouting of the captains.

Backward then to July, 1864, we must look and endeavor to visualize events and establish the relationship between the McPherson Monument in East Atlanta and the big brick orphanage on Copenhill.

The Army of the Tennessee, commanded by McPherson, consisted of three corps, the 15th, 16th, and 17th, commanded respectively by Logan, Dodge, and Blair. By the afternoon of July 21, this army had reached a position east of Atlanta, generally along the present Whitefoord avenue—the 17th Corps somewhat nearer the city. General Leggett, of that corps, having captured the high hill that morning which still bears his name. Fuller’s Division of the 16th Corps—mostly Morrill’s brigade, took position during the afternoon between Leggett’s Hill and the present McPherson avenue.

At 3 p.m., July 21, McPherson, over south of the Georgia railroad, wrote Sherman a dispatch, which was among the last he indited. In it, McPherson reported that General Leggett of the 3rd division, 17th Corps, had captured a high hill that overlooked Atlanta (the hill previously mentioned), which move had entailed a loss of nearly 300 killed and wounded. Furthermore, he had fortified the hill, and placed the entire 17th Corps there. He adds: “I have strengthened that portion of the line with all the available troops I have got, and will simply remark in closing that I have no cavalry as a body of observation on my flank, and that the whole rebel army, except Georgia militia, is not in front of the Army of the Cumberland.”

Indeed, he had no cavalry, for Sherman had that same day sent Garrard and his horsemen eastward to Covington to burn bridges. McPherson’s mention of his lack of

cavalry sounds like a reproach, and in the sequel, we are convinced that Hardee's Corps would never have marched undetected to the rear of the Tennessee army, and to that strip of pine woods where that army's commander ended his last ride. The last clause of the dispatch is reminiscent of Hooker's famous message from the Kolb Farm June 20, when he told Sherman that the entire Confederate army was in his front!

Sherman replied with an order directing McPherson to extend his line no farther than leftward of the hill and to employ the 16th Corps, most of which was in reserve north of the railroad, to lift every rail and to burn every tie of the Georgia railroad between Decatur and the advanced skirmish line toward Atlanta. The destruction of the railroad was the sole purpose for which the Tennessee army had moved to the east of Atlanta, and after this was accomplished, the same troops would be moved west of the city, against the other two railroads. McPherson's dispatch was received by Sherman at his headquarters at the intersection of North Decatur and Briarcliff Roads, the evening of the 21st, and early the next morning he sent the reply.

Also, on the morning of the 22nd, the outer Confederate line was abandoned, and the federal troops moved forward into them. Sherman, in person, rode to the summit of what we now know as Copenhill, and at the Augustus F. Hurt house—miscalled the “Howard house”—he established field headquarters.

McPherson spent his last night on earth at his headquarters tent just south of the railroad, near where East Lake Drive crosses. General Dodge joined him the next morning, the 22nd, and together they rode toward Atlanta on DeKalb avenue, much concerned as to what the Confederates intended doing, since they had evacuated their outer line. They rode forward within musket shot of the Confederate lines. McPherson concluded that whatever was intended, the left of his line needed strengthening, and he ordered Dodge to send Sweeny's division from north of the railroad to a point in rear or east of Leggett's Hill and the 17th Corps.

Dodge put Sweeny in motion and he marched via Clay Road (Clay street), which went westward at Fair street. Meanwhile McPherson and staff galloped over to Leggett's Hill and joined Blair in an inspection of Confederate lines, plainly seen across the valley of Entrenchment Creek. McPherson and Blair decided to take no chances, and orders were issued to strongly fortify the Hill. Giles A. Smith's division (formerly Gresham's) of the 17th Corps, having been crowded out of line, was placed southward of the hill, extending the intrenched line a little beyond the present intersection of Flat Shoals road and Glenwood Avenue.

The officers speculated much on what they saw across the valley: A considerable movement of troops was visible, trending southward, and a large number of the citizenry were perched upon the roofs of distant houses as if expecting to witness something imminent. McPherson declared, according to Blair, that the troops seen in motion were evacuating the city and the spectators were in position to behold the triumphant entrance of the federal army into Atlanta. Little did he suspect the plans of his former West Point classmate! For General Hood was getting ready for a second sortie, and Hardee's Corps was already in the thickets near the intersection of Flat Shoals and the middle McDonough road. The troops seen in motion were shifts in Cheatham's line near Grant park, and the spectators were there to behold the impending battle!

McPherson and Blair left the hill, and via the present McPherson avenue, then an indifferent country road through pine woods, they galloped eastward to a sharp turn

northward. All the narratives are most reticent as to the time of day. We are merely told of certain comings and goings, and that the battle began about noon and lasted until dark. We do get, however, the vivid picture of a hot July morning, a sultry atmosphere, the feverish, uncertain and ominous “feel” of something portending. It must have been 10 a.m. or later, when McPherson and Blair separated at the latter’s headquarters (near the new Whiteford public school). The commander of the Tennessee Army had several things to report to Sherman, so with his staff, he rode over to Sherman’s headquarters at Copenhill.

Sherman’s report states that he and Schofield were on the hill “about 10 a.m. examining the appearance of the enemy’s line opposing the distillery.” While thus engaged, McPherson and staff clattered up. This was probably about 11 o’clock. Sherman and McPherson dismounted and walked back to the big house and sat on the steps. Sherman has recorded much of their conversation, and even described how his lieutenant was dressed, for it was the last time he saw him alive.

General Hood, appointed July 17, to replace General Joseph E. Johnston, seems to have been the first subject of conversation. McPherson and Hood had been classmates at West Point, along with Schofield and Sheridan, and Sherman inquired of McPherson as to Hood’s general character. What McPherson actually said is not recorded, but Hood’s recent conduct at Kolb’s farm, just a month previously, and McPherson’s estimate of him, caused the two of them to agree that they should “be unusually cautious and prepared at all times for sallies and for hard fighting, because Hood, though not deemed much of a scholar, or of great mental capacity, was undoubtedly a brave, determined, and rash man; and the change of commanders at that particular crisis argued the displeasure of the Confederate government, with the caution, but prudent conduct, of General Joseph Johnston.”

McPherson’s purpose in this visit was then made known. He had gotten the order to put the 16th Corps to work destroying the railroad, after that corps had been sent southward to strengthen the left of the line where it was needed, and, as for the railroad, the pioneer corps could attend to that. At Leggett’s Hill he proposed to erect heavy batteries to shell the rolling mills (on the present site of the Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills), and other buildings visible behind the city fortifications.

Sherman assented to this program, and then the two of them walked down the Williams Mill road a short distance, where a map lay on the ground, and the two officers sat down at the foot of a tree and discussed future operations. Sherman repeated, verbally, the instructions sent that morning to McPherson, the copy of which the latter then had in his pocket.

Meanwhile, the skirmishers down by the distillery were still active, and an occasional cannon shot crashed through the leafy canopy of the hill, replying to the 23rd Corps artillery posted down the slope. As they talked, it was noticed that the gunfire became general along the Cumberland Army’s line to the right, and was increasing in volume leftward, where McPherson’s own troops were posted. Soon, the volume of musketry southward indicated more than mere skirmishing, and punctuating it were distant reports of firing far to the left and rear, the direction being tested by Sherman’s pocket compass, as being toward Decatur. No known facts warranted all this firing, so McPherson called for his horse to ride to the left of his line.

James Birdseye McPherson was not yet 36 years of age. His career had been notable. He was born in Sandusky, Ohio, November 14, 1828, and was graduated from West Point in 1853. He practiced engineering in the government employ, and taught it at West Point. When the war broke out, he raised a force of engineers, and later was aide to Major General Halleck. In December, 1862, he was given command of the 17th Corps. His services in reinforcing Rosecrans after Corinth, October, 1862, won him the rank of major general of volunteers, and after the fall of Vicksburg, he was commissioned brigadier general in the regular army. March 12, 1864, he succeeded General Sherman in command of the Army of the Tennessee.

In Sherman's report, dated, Atlanta, September 15, 1864, he states that McPherson "remained with me until near noon, when some reports reaching us that indicated a movement of the enemy on that flank (the left), he mounted and rode away with his staff." Then the report continues with mention of the gun fire on the left and from the direction of Decatur, not heard until after McPherson's departure, this being the first actual warning of the opening battle.

Years later, when Sherman wrote his "Memoirs," he described the visit of McPherson in detail, and stated that it was the sound of firing on the left that caused McPherson to hastily depart. Just why this discrepancy in the two narratives is not explained.

Cox states that McPherson stopped near the railroad, en route to the left of the line, to confer with Blair and Logan, and all noticed the increasingly heavy fire from the front of the 16th Corps. This was Walker's and Bate's assault, for Hardee's Confederate forces had gotten in behind the 17th Corps at Leggett's Hill, and in the absence of federal cavalry, had penetrated almost unobserved to Sugar Creek Valley, between Glenwood avenue on the south; Fair street on the north, and between Rogers street prolongation on the east, and Flat Shoals on the west.

Had the attack been made earlier in the day, the surprise would have been complete, but by noon Sweeny's division of the 16th Corps was standing in the road, in column of fours, waiting for the word to move to the left of the 17th Corps line, at what is now the business district of East Atlanta. The exact position of Sweeny's division we now know as Fair and Clay streets. The head of Sweeny's column was in Fair street, a block or so west of Clay, and the rest of the line bent around into Clay street, the division having moved from the north of the railroad.

So Walker and Bate, moving north and northwest, instead of delivering a surprise attack in the rear of 15th and 17th Corps, marched right into the compact line of federals, who could not have been better placed, had Hardee served advance notice of his intentions! A left-face was all that was necessary to place Sweeny squarely across the front of Walker and Bate, and here began the battle of Atlanta. It was the heavy firing here that apprised McPherson at Sherman's headquarters that the battle was joined.

Blair and Logan galloped to their commands, and McPherson, with his staff, hastened to where Dodge and the 16th Corps were now rallying after the first thrust by Walker and Bate.

McPherson galloped forward to a hill that overlooks Sugar Creek valley, as described, where this spirited combat was taking place. This hill is now the beautiful site of the Murphy Junior High school, and McPherson's route placed him on the eastern slope of it, at or near where the deep cut of East Side street is located, and a little south of

Fair street. Here McPherson reined his horse to a standstill, and with Lieutenant Colonel W. E. Strong, watched the massed column's of Walker's division, three or four lines deep, move out of the dense timber several hundred yards from Sweeny's position, the right of which was well south of the present Fair street, and east of the stream. Colonel Strong describes the scene as grand and impressive. "It seemed to us that every mounted officer of the attacking column was riding at the front or at the right or left of the first line of battle. The regimental colors waved and fluttered in advance of the lines . . ."

The assault was met by a deadly barrage of shell from Laird's 14th Ohio, and Welker's batteries, posted on the hill just south of where Clay street joins Fair. Fuller's division was on Sweeny's right, west of the stream, and directly in front of where McPherson had paused to watch the battle. While here, the general sent his aides with orders to right and left, until only one remained with him. The wagon trains were ordered to a safer place; a message was sent to Logan to place his reserve brigade (Wangelin's) in the gap between Fuller's right and Leggett's Hill, and when Wangelin had moved to position, he was on the western slope of the knoll where the Junior High school buildings now stand.

Having received several messages from Blair that the left of his line (at Flat Shoals and Glenwood) was hotly engaged, McPherson galloped forward on the same road he was then on, and one that led to where Smith's division was being crowded by Cleburne's assault up Flat Shoals road. It was the same route, now traversed by McPherson, that he had ridden over, about 10 a.m., when returning from Leggett's Hill. No Confederate troops were in the immediate vicinity then, and it did not occur to him that the left-center of Hardee's attack could be near the road, with Fuller's troops where they were. Yet that was just what had happened. Govan's and Smith's (Granbury's) brigades of Cleburne's division, had penetrated between East Side street and Flat Shoals road to as far north as McPherson avenue, and some of these troops were facing eastward, and moving near and parallel to the avenue, in their attack on Morrill's brigade of Fuller's division.

Forward galloped McPherson, with his single aide. Blair, who had meanwhile reached the vicinity, saw the two horsemen moving on the road; saw them disappear in the skirt of timber; heard a volley of musketry, and saw McPherson's horse, riderless, come tearing out of the woods! The general had gone southward from his stopping place toward Fuller's troops who were heavily engaged in open ground south of McPherson avenue, had turned sharply to the west, traversing the road through open ground (or only partly wooded), and passing the rail fence on the left that marked the boundary of field and wood – down a slight depression to a point west of a small stream line, and less than 50 feet from the fence. Here he galloped into advancing line of skirmishers! They called out to him to surrender. He halted, lifted his hat by way of salute, and wheeled his horse around. The volley that was instant, unhorsed him, mortally wounded. The aide also was wounded, and captured.

There are several accounts extant that purport to be eye-witness narratives of McPherson's death. In this Confederate skirmish line were troops of the 5th Confederate regiment, then attached to Smith's (Granbury's) brigade of Cleburne's division. Captain Richard Beard, of this regiment, says: "I was ordered by General Cleburne to advance and never halt until the enemy's breastworks were taken. We ran through a line of skirmishers and took them without firing a gun and suddenly came to the edge of a

narrow wagon road running parallel with our line of march, down which General McPherson came thundering at the head of his staff. He came upon us suddenly. My own company had reached the verge of the road when he discovered us, I was so near him as to see the very features of his face. I threw up my sword as a signal for him to surrender. He checked his horse, raised his hat in salute, wheeled to the right, and dashed off to the rear in a gallop.

“Corporal Coleman, who was near me, was ordered to fire, and it was his shot that killed General McPherson. At the time that Coleman fired, the general was bending forward passing under the branches of a tree; the ball ranged upward and passed near his heart. A volley was fired at his fleeing staff. I ran up to the general, who had fallen upon his knees and face but he had no signs of life in him. Right by the general’s side lay a signal officer of his staff, whose horse had been shot from under him, who, if hurt at all, was slightly wounded. He told me that the dead man was General McPherson.”

Another account states that this same Captain Beard was in command of the 3rd Confederate regiment of Govan’s brigade, making a difference of regiment and brigade. The frequent shifts of regiments causes endless confusion. Still another account states that Robert D. Compton, Co. I, 24th Texas regiment of Smith’s brigade, fired the fatal shot. However, Captain Beard’s account is so vivid, that we must conclude that whatever regiment he was in, or what brigade, he must have seen all that he describes. All these troops were of Cleburne’s division, and no one has ever questioned that statement that none but Cleburne’s troops were in skirmish line on that part of the field. The controversy is confined to certain units of that division only.

In the light of the preceding narrative of McPherson’s death, General Orders No. 8, of July 20, 1864, issued by Assistant Adjutant General A.J. Alexander at 17th Corps headquarters, makes curious reading. In this publication, Private George J. Reynolds, D Company, 15th Iowa Regt., is awarded a gold medal for administering aid and comfort to the dying McPherson whom he found lying in the woods. It is recited that Reynolds had been shot in the arm while on the skirmish line (his regiment was then at Glenwood avenue at the foot of Haas avenue). In attempting to escape capture, he came upon his mortally wounded commander, and, amid the roar of battle and storm of bullets, he remained with him to the last, giving such aid as he could, quenching the dying thirst of this general, etc.

This account is not necessarily spoiled by the reasonable assurance that McPherson was dead within ten seconds after he was shot. Dr. Hewitt, over at the “Howard” house, testified that such was the case, and Captain Beard’s statement has been given.

McPherson’s papers and field glasses were taken during the interval between his death and the recovery of his body. The latter was accomplished by the 64th Illinois regiment of Morrill’s brigade. General Fuller ordered this regiment, then on the right of the brigade, to drive the Confederate skirmishers out of the woods back of the rail fence and along the road. The assault was made under heavy fire, and the advanced position was held only a few minutes. But there was sufficient time to enable Private George Sherland of B Company, and others, to bear to the rear the body of McPherson. Some Confederate prisoners were taken, and on them were found the papers and field glasses of the general. One of these papers was the letter Sherman had written that morning detailing the future plans of the federal army!

The body was placed in an ambulance and Colonels Strong and Clark, Captains Steele and Gile retraced the route back to Sherman's headquarters at the Augustus Hurt house.

The following is an attempt to establish the course of this route from the headquarters at Copenhill, to the monument, at McPherson avenue and Monument avenue.

Of course, McPherson would want to take the most direct route consistent with rapid traveling. The country was wooded, somewhat rough, and the cultivated fields were obstructed by fences. The front line of the federals crossed the railroad at DeGress avenue, and southward, the line was generally along the present Moreland avenue, though there was no Moreland avenue there then. Northward of the railroad, the line traversed Inman park, crossing Euclid near Alta, and crossing Highland, just east of Copenhill avenue, where it ascended the western slope of Copenhill. Obviously McPherson's route would be east of this line, and far enough to the rear to be safe.

In 1864 Highland avenue, coming from the north, did not touch Copenhill as it does now. It swung southeastward at the present North avenue, where it crossed Williams Mill road near its present intersection. This carried "Highland avenue" across the present P. H. Snook property (at Seminole and Cleburne) and, as Cleburne avenue it went on southeastward to Little Five Points. The east and west section of Cleburne avenue was non-existent then, but was probably represented by a field road up to the Augustus Hurt house.

Still southeastward, it crossed the present five intersections and traversed the elevated grade in the blocks bounded by Moreland, McLendon, DeKalb and Candler. Between Candler and Elmira, it crossed the railroad, and La France street carried it eastward to a point between Hutchinson and Mayson. Here a road led an irregular course due south. It was east of Hutchinson, and west of the stream line which is one of the many branches of Sugar creek.

This stretch of the roadway is no longer visible in places, but the grassy sward west of the stream is occasionally scored by wheel tracks, and area, being mostly low ground, is still unimproved. Hardee street was cross just east of Hutchinson, and threaded a diagonal course through woods still standing, to the present intersection of Boulevard drive and Montgomery street. This point was just east of Blair's headquarters, which were on the hill northeast of the Whitefoord school. The trace of the old road is still visible here. Montgomery street is an unimproved section of the route, south of Boulevard drive, but it stops at the south Decatur car line.

In 1864, the road continued across the valley of the east and west branch of the stream – climbing the steep hill to Fair street. Here it passed between the present houses at 1458 and 1462 Fair street, S.E. Here East Side street carried the route southward, over the eastern slope of the hill where Murphy Junior High school is located – but East Side street and Fair street are at present sunk within deep cuts made in the hill. In '64, East Side street was at grade level and from the forward slope of the hill, McPherson and Strong stopped to watch the combat over to the southeast, where Walker and Bate were assaulting Sweeny's division of the 16th corps, in the valley as described. On the hill slope, the roadway left the course of East Side street and swung a little southeast to the present intersection of an unimproved street called Park street and the terminus of McPherson avenue.

The house at 1485 McPherson avenue, S.E. – at present the last house on the street, occupies a lot that is bounded on the north by McPherson avenue, and on the south by a narrow roadway, cinder-paved. This is referred to in old deeds as the “Old McPherson Road,” and it is the trace of the old route we are describing. The present section of McPherson avenue, east of the monument is no part of the original road. The cinder road mentioned is a section of the old road and McPherson turned sharply to the right or westward here and followed the course to the present East Side street. Here the road trended a little north of west, and joined the paved section of the avenue at the monument. Here McPherson was killed. The road forked near the monument: the right or north fork is McPherson avenue, the south fork ran southwest and no longer exists. It was visible as late as 1909, where the writer traversed its partly wooded course to the intersection of Glenwood and Flat Shoals. This fork was likely the one McPherson would have taken, for it led to the left of his line. The north fork – now paved – is part of the battle field road to Leggett’s Hill.

Shortly after the war an army engineer located the tall pine tree under which McPherson was killed. He established the location through personal knowledge of events, and the testimony of others, equally conversant with the facts. A photograph was made of the site. The engineer scored the tree-trunk with distinguishing marks and ran lines up to the Georgia railroad, establishing certain station points there. His survey was used when the monument was placed where we now behold it, and its proper location has never been questioned. Mr. J. W. McWilliams, still residing in East Atlanta, states that the monument was erected about 1870.

The marble block under the big gun, so McWilliams states – is hollow and contains a metal box filled with papers, like a corner stone. The original railing around the monument was composed of gun barrels set vertically in two iron rails, the gun barrels being tipped by metal spear heads. All these gun barrels were wrenched loose and purloined by visitors, and when they were gone, pine cones from the big tree were at a premium. Monument avenue was cut through the woods in recent years and today the monument site sits midway the width of Monument avenue, and at the south border of McPherson avenue.

The route, as given, is compiled from old war maps and the reports of federal officers who were engaged in the fighting at and near the terminus of McPherson’s last ride.

