



April 2022

***Point Blank Business
License Plate to the Battle of Wauhatchie***



This battlefield supporter views the New York monument at the site of the Battle of Wauhatchie. This monument sits at the base of a knoll, farmed by a family named Rowden at the time of the war, around which Union General John Geary formed his defensive line. The railroad embankment in the background was used by Confederates as a breastwork and Lookout Mountain looms in the distance. Today, heavy industrial and residential development have destroyed much of the Wauhatchie battlefield and this lone monument stands as the only reminder of this battle that secured the opening of the “cracker line” for the beleaguered Army of the Cumberland starving in Chattanooga.

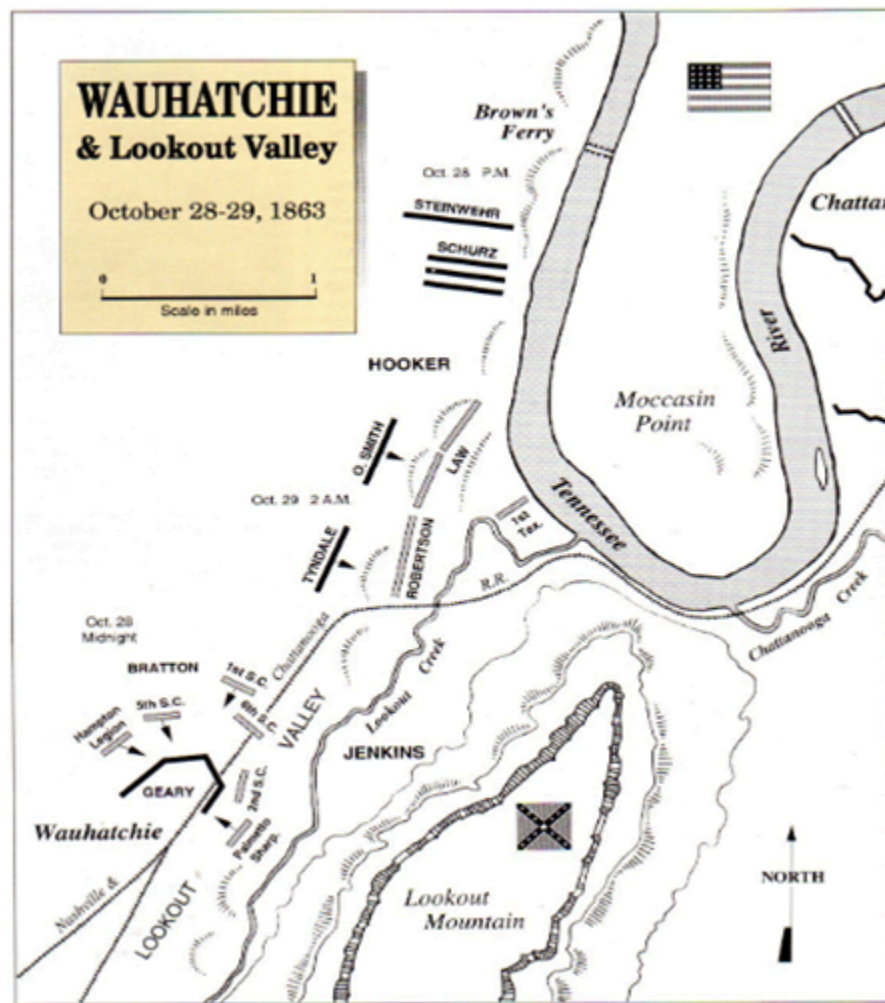
Defeat at the battle of Chickamauga in late September 1863, left the Union’s Army of the Cumberland surrounded in Chattanooga. Confederate occupation of Lookout Mountain and Lookout Valley closed the “short route” of 25 miles to the main Union supply depot at Bridgeport, Alabama and a roundabout route that covered 60 miles and required a tortuous crossing of Walden’s Ridge was used to keep the army supplied. By the time that U. S. Grant replaced W. S. Rosecrans in

command at Chattanooga in late October, over 10,000 horses and mules had perished traveling over the rough mountain roads and the Army of the Cumberland was **near starvation**.

In a **daring amphibious operation** in the dark early morning hours of October 27, 1863, roughly 1500 men of the Army of the Cumberland floated down the Tennessee River in pontoon type boats. Landing at the lightly guarded old Tennessee river crossing ferry established before the Cherokee removal as part of the “Federal Road” system, a pontoon bridge and bridgehead was established around “**Brown’s Ferry**” after a small but sharp battle.

Reinforcements from the Army of the Potomac in Virginia, under General Joseph Hooker, had arrived in Bridgeport and as part of the plan to open the “cracker line” were to march along the Nashville and Chattanooga RR into Lookout Valley, reinforcing the established bridgehead at Brown’s Ferry. Arriving a day behind schedule on October 28, Hooker marched the bulk of his column, **roughly 10,000 men**, to Brown’s Tavern, in supporting distance of the men at the Brown’s Ferry bridgehead. Hooker directed a small brigade size detachment, approximately 1200-1500 men under General John Geary, to remain at the Wauhatchie rail junction, three miles from the main body around Brown’s Tavern and Ferry.

A six foot-four inch, 44 year-old native of Pennsylvania, a Mexican War veteran, first mayor of San Francisco, and territorial governor of Kansas, **John Geary** was a political general with a record better than most men of that genre. Among the units present with Geary at Wauhatchie was Knap’s Pennsylvania Battery which numbered amongst its officers, **General Geary’s son**, 18 year-old Lieutenant Edward Geary.



From *Echoes of Battle: Chattanooga: The Struggle for Chattanooga* by Baumgartner and Strayer.

Geary realized that his isolated position was “**distinctly visible to the enemy’s signal station on the table of Lookout Mountain...**I ordered my command to bivouac upon their arms with cartridge boxes on, and placed my guns on a knob about 30 yards to the left of the railroad and immediately to the left of Rowden’s house...” Indeed, Confederate pickets had seen the entrance of Hooker’s

column into Lookout Valley and General James Longstreet who was present on Lookout Mountain along with General Braxton Bragg related, "...a messenger came bursting through the brushwood, asking for General Longstreet, and reported the **enemy marching along the base of the mountain**... A plan was made to capture the rear guard by night attack."

Longstreet gave command of the attack to General Micah Jenkins who directed that Bratton's brigade of South Carolinians would make the main Confederate attack down the Nashville and Chattanooga RR against Geary's position. Law's Alabama (now Sheffield's) and Robertson's Texas brigades would be positioned astride a hill adjacent to the Brown's Ferry Road to act as a blocking force to prevent Union reinforcements from Hooker's main body at the Tavern/Ferry from reaching Geary or blocking the Confederate retreat route across Lookout Creek. Another blocking force, "Rock" Benning's Georgia brigade, would be positioned atop a second hill on the Brown's Ferry Road roughly a quarter mile east of Law's men. At approximately 10:30 p.m. on the 28th, a picket force from Geary's encampment stumbled into some of Law's men along Brown's Ferry Road and the **first shots of the Battle of Wauhatchie rang out**. The sound of the firing put Geary's men and the main body at the Tavern/Ferry on alert, but shortly after, silence again filled the cloudy but moon lit night.

Just after midnight on October 29, Bratton's South Carolinians struck Geary's pickets and descended upon the main camp where "**bedlam reigned**" despite the earlier alert. A New York soldier remembered, "[We] were thoroughly surprised and unprepared for an enemy [we] could not divine." *It was so dark the Confederates could not be seen but their officers' commands could be distinctly heard recalled the New Yorker. He further related that as Knap's battery fired into the dark void, "The flash of the four guns lighted up our whole front, showing for an instant the line coming toward us...the flash of rebel muskets marked their line, and the bullets began to come."* Going at each other with a "**brutal tenacity**", the two lines came "**so close at hand it was difficult to distinguish friend from foe.**" Bratton's frontal assault finally ground to a halt in the stubble of the Rowden corn field from which point the battle became an exchange of volleys. Rowden family members huddled in the farmhouse as the trading of volleys **reduced the home "to splinters."**

Elements of the 2nd South Carolina and Palmetto Sharpshooters ensconced themselves behind the railroad embankment on Geary's right flank, firing into Knap's Battery as the cannon blasts illuminated the night. "*We could hear the devils shout, 'Shoot the gunners! Shoot the gunners! It was point-blank business,*" recalled a Union officer. With Knap's Battery down to two guns due to the loss of battery horses, men, and a lack of ammunition, a **gun was man-handled** across the railroad track and positioned to fire down the Confederate side of the embankment. Two to three blasts of canister persuaded the South Carolinians to abandon the railroad embankment.

Hearing the firing at the Wauhatchie junction, at 1:30 a.m. Hooker dispatched reinforcements to make the three-mile march to support Geary. **Ambushed** by Law's Alabamians, Robertson's Texans, and Benning's Georgians stationed along hills adjacent to Brown's Ferry Road, *these reinforcements would never reach Geary*. Bratton received orders shortly after 3 a.m. to break off and withdraw, as did the other Confederate brigades along Brown's Ferry Road. 215 of Geary's and 356 of Bratton's men had become **casualties in one of the war's rare night battles**. Brown's Ferry on October 27th had opened the "cracker line." The battle of Wauhatchie, October 28-29 insured it would stay open. Over the next month, thousands of men and tons of munitions and supplies flowed into Chattanooga through Lookout Valley, making "**inevitable**" the Federal victories at Lookout Mountain and Missionary Ridge of late November.



General John Geary - a member of the 149th New York who had helped repulse Bratton's attacks, recalled, *"When the rays of the rising sun came over Lookout Mountain they fell with a mellow light upon the tall and portly form of Gen. Geary, standing with bowed head on the summit of the knoll, while before him lay the lifeless form of a Lieutenant of artillery. Scattered about were cannon, battered and bullet marked caissons and limbers, and many teams of horses dead in harness. And there were many other dead, but none attracted his attention, save this one, **for it was his son.** The men respecting his sorrow stood at a distance in silence as he communed with his grief."*

As he stood up from aiming a cannon and yelled, **"Fire!"**, **Lieutenant Edward Geary** was **struck dead** by a minie ball between the eyes.



*The Rowden farm knoll today. Geary's guns were just to the left of the cars parked in front of building. The Rowden **family covered** in the basement of their house approximately where the dumpster and block building stand on the picture's right.*

SEND US YOUR PHOTOS!

If you have a “Save our Battlefields” license plate, please consider stopping by and taking a photo of your plate at a battlefield or other battle-related Civil War site in your area... we’re especially interested in sites that don’t always get the historians’ spotlight! If you’re looking for a site in your area, we can help find one nearby – just email us - or if you’ve already got that special photo please send to info@tcwpa.org.



You can purchase the license plate at your County Clerk’s office for \$36.00 plus your regular registration fees. Proceeds from the sale of the plate will help protect and interpret important battlefields in Tennessee.

For more information, visit: tcwpa.org/license-plate

The Tennessee Civil War Preservation Association preserves and interprets Tennessee’s Civil War Battlefields and their contributing landscapes for present and future generations.

Become a member: tcwpa.org/join Make a donation: tcwpa.org/donate [Purchase a license plate](http://tcwpa.org/license-plate)

