

Battles Come Alive in Chattanooga

A cannon relic of the Civil War is perched on a mountain overlooking the city.



BY SUSAN B. BARNES

The mist rises from the dewy grass like steam from a hot cup of coffee. The eerie silence surrounds me as I stand at the brink of one of the most important sites of Civil War history. The scenery is so beautiful, the view so expansive, that it's hard to believe that 34,000 soldiers perished on these very grounds.

Chattanooga, once known as the "Gateway to the South," is steeped in Civil War history. It's of this now-thriving city that Abraham Lincoln once said, "Whoever controls Chattanooga will win the war." A thriving railroad center over a century ago, the city was seen as a tremendous asset to both sides. With rail tracks leading to Atlanta, Nashville, Memphis, Charleston, Knoxville and up to Virginia, whichever side gained control could dictate the transport of supplies and reinforcements—a powerful option.

The Battle of Chickamauga was the bloodiest and deadliest two-day battle of the Civil War. Artillery sounds from the battle could be heard 50 miles south in Rome, Georgia. More than 34,000 soldiers of the Confederate and Union armies perished November 23 and 24, 1863, creating what Confederate General William Bates called a "River of Death."

To pay homage to those who fell in battle, veterans of the war established the Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park, spanning from Tennessee into Georgia, in 1890. The park was dedicated in 1895 and is the oldest and largest military memorial in the U.S. Fourteen hundred monuments and markers stand

proud, marking the sites of some of the most important battles in history. The park features self-guided tours through Chickamauga on Lookout and Signal mountains, Missionary Ridge and Orchard Knob. Living history demonstrations are conducted throughout the summer season.

The Chickamauga Battlefield Park Headquarters and Visitor's Center, which you'll want to stop by upon arriving at the park, was built in 1935 and expanded in 1990. Here you'll find a state-of-the-art audio visual program that explains the battle and its importance in the Civil War.

Also housed at the visitor's center is the Fuller Collection of American Military Arms. Three hundred and forty-five firearms and other rare items and weapons are on display for all to see in a highly secured area. Considered to be the best collection of Springfield longrifles in the world, it's a display not to miss. If you want to find out more about the collection and its history, ask one of the very knowledgeable park rangers on site.

Point Park on Lookout Mountain is the site of one of the most impressive monuments. The New York Peace Monument depicts a Union

and Confederate soldier shaking hands, symbolizing the reunification of the United States as a nation. Inside the Point Park Visitor's Center you'll find the equally impressive 13'x33' mural "Battle of Lookout Mountain," by James Walker. General "Fighting Joe" Hooker commissioned Walker to paint the mural for \$20,000. To ensure his place in history, General Hooker insisted that he be front and center in the mural.

Next door to the Point Park Visitor's Center is the masterfully designed Battles for Chattanooga Electric Map and Museum. Sit back in the theater and watch as the battle is played out on a 480-square-foot reproduction of the historic terrain that staged the battles. Sights and sounds of the battle and 5,000 miniature soldiers complement the intriguing narrative that tells the story of the famous battle.

But if you really want to get a feel for the battle, drive around the park. Step out into the fields where troops fought for what they believed in. Breathe in the air of the now-peaceful landscape that saw so much. Listen to the life around you, and think of those who were lost. ■

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