SWANNANOA GAP ENGAGEMENT

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Blocking the Way

NORTH CAROLINA CIVIL WAR TRAILS

STONEMAN'S RAID

On March 24, 1865, Union Gen. George Stoneman led 6,000 cavalrymen from Tennessee into southwestern Virginia and western North Carolina to disrupt the Confederate supply line by destroying sections of the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad, the North Carolina Railroad, and the Piedmont Railroad. He struck at Boone on March 28, headed into Virginia on April 2, and returned to North Carolina a week later. Stoneman's Raid ended at Asheville on April 26, the day that Confederate Gen. Joseph E. Johnston surrendered to Union Gen. William T. Sherman near Durham.

Gen. Alvan C. Gillem
Library of Congress

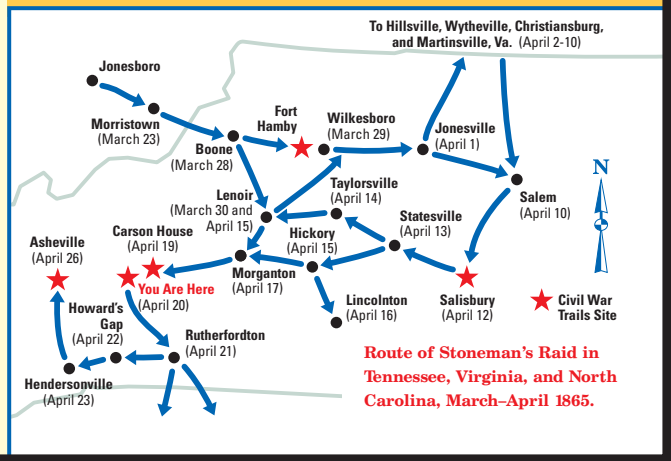
On April 20, 1865, Union Gen. Alvan C. Gillem, leading two of Gen. George Stoneman's brigades, attempted to cross the Blue Ridge at Swannanoa Gap en route to Asheville. Confederate Gen. James G. Martin sent his entire command to the gap and stopped Gillem at Royal Gorge (in front of you to the left). Pvt. Charles White recalled, "Our Home Guard got busy on the mountain sides and cut big trees across the roads leading to Swannanoa and Lakey's Gaps. We succeeded in making a barricade that no cavalry force would soon cross or clear away, but those of us (25 or 30) working on the road to the Swannanoa Gap were trapped in the gorge by a too early appearance of a part of Stoneman's men and were quickly taken prisoners." Gillem, who reported Swannanoa Gap "effectually blockaded and defended," left Col. John K. Miller's brigade to hold the Confederates in place with feigned attacks while he led the rest of his men to Rutherfordton, 40 miles south of here.

Two days later, the raiders approached Asheville after "a forced march of sixty-nine miles" through Rutherford, Polk and Henderson Counties. Then, wrote White, "The Yankees got word of General Lee's [April 9] surrender and soon all of their prisoners were given freedom to go where they chose." The 17-year-old White returned to his home on the Broad River while Stoneman's raiders continued toward Asheville.

"I regarded the possession of one of the gaps of the Blue Ridge as being absolutely necessary to the safety of my command."
— Gen. Alvan C. Gillem

MYSTERY GRAVE

Near here is a mysterious grave. Its occupant is unknown, and Confederate veterans told two conflicting stories about it. In one version, a Union scout was stabbed in a scuffle with a Home Guardsman. The other scouts retreated, calling out to him, "Come on, Bill." The Home Guard buried the man with a crude gravestone inscribed "Bill." According to the other account, a Union deserter named Carver, en route from Asheville to Morganton with other prisoners, overpowered and shot a guard named Bledsoe while resting at a Swannanoa Gap spring. Carver was shot and killed, too. One version says that both men were buried on the site, while another says that Carver was buried there and Bledsoe returned to Asheville. In 1914, the Winston-Salem Union Republican claimed that Carver was exhumed and buried in a Henderson County churchyard.



Route of Stoneman's Raid in Tennessee, Virginia, and North Carolina, March–April 1865.