

Former state park superintendent reflects on Battle of Droop Mountain



Observation Tower at Droop Mountain Battlefield State Park in Pocahontas County.

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DROOP MOUNTAIN, W.Va. — The Battle of Droop Mountain, in November of 1863 is known as the largest Civil War battle on West Virginia soil and the action that ended Confederate resistance in the Mountain State.

Mike Smith spent 32 years working at the Droop Mountain Battlefield State Park in Pocahontas County and retired as Superintendent in 2016. He says during the Civil War, the only way to move large amounts of supplies and troops in rugged terrain was the railroad.

The Confederate Army had the Virginia Tennessee and Virginia Central Railroads and the Union Army relied on the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad for supplies.

“Everything that happened in West Virginia was a result of the Confederates either trying to go up and tear up the B & O Railroad OR the Union Army trying to push down into the south tearing up the Virginia-Tennessee or the Virginia Central

Railroads which connected the Shenandoah Valley with Richmond,” Smith recently told MetroNews.

Confederate troops were dispatched west after Chickamauga in the fall of 1863 trying to push the Union Army out of Tennessee. That troop movement left many military targets relatively unprotected in the area of Dublin, Virginia.

When Union Army officials heard the news, they sent Colonel William W. Averell and 3,800 men to strike the railroad and other military targets.

Soon, Brigadier General John Echols was at the Confederate headquarters in Lewisburg, got word of the movement. Echols marched his troops through the night to Droop Mountain. Droop Mountain was the high point on the way to Lewisburg and provided an ideal defensive position.

“(Echols) Got there about dawn and held off the Union Army through the early part of the day,” Smith said, “But, in the afternoon he was driven back, and the Union Army followed up through the night, chasing him back to Lewisburg and into Virginia.”

The second in command of the Confederate forces was the grandfather of World War II General George S. Patton, Colonel George Patton Snr. Echols regularly left Col. Patton in charge while he performed political duties. On one occasion, Patton successfully battled Union forces in August of 1863 in White Sulphur Springs while Echols was away from the battlefield.

“He was sent over to the left flank at the tail end of the battle by Echols to try to pull things together, but it had already fallen apart,” Smith said. “It was chaos as the men fell back to the highway and tried to escape.”

After 275 Confederates were killed, they were chased into Virginia. The Union Army losses totaled 119.

Like many Civil War battles, brothers fought against brothers and neighbors fought against neighbors.

“They had been fighting on opposite sides in the war, and some of them had a hard time getting back together,” Smith said. “Some just couldn’t get along and moved west, but others managed to put their differences aside and went back to being neighbors.”

Smith says for 32 years it was a privilege to open the gate every morning and take in the beauty and history.

“It’s about 3,000 feet to the top of the mountain, and the valley below is about 2,300. So, all along it you can see the fog coming up from the river, sometimes it looks like the ocean out there and you could just walk on top of the clouds, sometimes the fog is low enough and the little hills stick and they look like islands in the ocean,” Smith said.



A view on a fall day from the observation tower.