The Battle of Chickamauga flashed into a white-hot clash on September 19, 1863, following engagements in eastern and central Tennessee and northern Mississippi that caused the withdrawal of the Confederate Army of Tennessee (renamed from the Army of Mississippi) under GEN Braxton Bragg to Chattanooga, Tenn. Bragg was forced to make a further withdrawal into northwest Georgia after the Union’s Army of the Cumberland, under MG William S. Rosecrans, crossed the Tennessee River below Chattanooga, flanking Bragg’s primary line of defense.

Chattanooga was a strategic prize. Union forces needed it as a transportation hub and supply center for the planned campaign into Georgia. The South needed the North not to have it.

At LaFayette, Ga., about 26 miles south of Chattanooga, Bragg received reinforcements. After preliminary fights to stop Rosecrans, he crossed Chickamauga Creek to check the Union advance.

In two days of bloody fighting, Bragg gained a tactical victory over Rosecrans at Chickamauga, driving the Army of the Cumberland from the battlefield. The stage was set for Bragg to lose the strategic campaign for Chattanooga, however, as he failed to pursue the retreating Union force, allowing it to withdraw into Chattanooga behind a heroic rear-guard stand by a force assembled from the disarray by MG George H. Thomas.

The Battle of Chickamauga is cited as the last major Southern victory of the Civil War in the Western Theater. It bled both armies. Although official records are sketchy in part, estimates put Northern casualties at around 16,200 and Southern casualties at around 18,000.

Demoralized by the loss at Chickamauga, unable to stop Confederate cavalry sorties that choked Union supply lines into Chattanooga and unsuccessful in driving away Confederates from heights overlooking the city, Rosecrans was relieved of command by MG Ulysses S. Grant.

Strongly derided by subordinate commanders for his failure to seize the opportunity to destroy the Union Army during its retreat from Chickamauga, Bragg remained in command largely because of his friendship with the Confederate president, Jefferson Davis. Enduring continuing losses in the months following Chickamauga, however, Bragg would lose Chattanooga entirely and open the Union’s gateway to Georgia.
Chattanooga the Prize