

SPONSORED Johnston County Visitors Bureau

# Explore Civil War History and Modern Amenities in Johnston County, North Carolina

Visit the area around Bentonville in North Carolina, where you can walk the Civil War's last major battlefield, shop for unique items, and savor tasty craft brews and meals.

BY PETE M. ANDERSON - MARCH 4, 2019

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Most days, the forests and fields in this peaceful corner of eastern North Carolina belie the battle that occurred here. Nearly 155 years ago, Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston's 20,000 troops fought Union General William Tecumseh Sherman's 60,000 soldiers, who were headed to Goldsboro for supplies. It was the last major engagement of the Civil War—Johnston surrendered his remaining troops about a month later—and the largest fought on North Carolina soil.

**Bentonville Battlefield State Historic Site** hosts a full-scale re-enactment of the three-day battle every five years, with the next edition taking place the weekend of March 20-22, 2020. About 64,000 people came in 2015 to attend lectures, review artifacts, listen to period music, and purchase Civil War-related items. And legions of re-enactors replayed the Confederates' failed attempt to stop the northerly march of Sherman's army, which had left a path of destruction through South Carolina and

Georgia.

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But you don't have to wait until 2020's full-scale re-enactment to experience the battlefield, because the history and hospitality in the cities around Bentonville in **Johnston County** are always on display. Tours, living history events, and smaller battle re-enactments—always held during March's third weekend—bring it to life nearly every day, and you'll also find plenty of shopping, unique craft brews, delicious meals, and comfortable places to lay your head.

Johnston County is roughly a six-hour drive from Atlanta, and Amtrak trains stop twice daily in Selma. Delta and Southwest airlines combine for about a dozen daily nonstop flights between Hartsfield-Jackson and Raleigh-Durham international airports. The latter is about 45 minutes up Interstate 40 from **Benson**, home to a recently built **Hampton Inn**.

Each of the Hampton's rooms includes a 50-inch HDTV, minifridge, microwave, Wi-Fi, and use of the fitness center. Take time to enjoy the complimentary hot breakfast, outdoor saline pool and pergola-covered patio, complete with fireplace. Pets are welcome, with a dog park conveniently located next door.

If you want a modern version of the soldiers' accommodations, make reservations at **Raleigh Oaks Campground** in **Four Oaks**. Choose from cottages with furnished kitchens and flat-screen TVs that sleep up to eight people or one of 150 full-service RV

sites. Either way, make time to enjoy its nine-hole miniature golf course.

More accommodations are available up I-95 in **Smithfield**, where you can tour a **museum** that honors Hollywood star Ava Gardner or relax with a board game, beer, and hand-tossed pizza at **Simple Twist Taproom and Bottle Shop**. Try its JoCo calzone—grilled chicken, bacon, mozzarella, and a side of ranch dressing. And nearby **Selma antique district** has more than 100,000 square feet of stores that are steps apart.

Find more treasures from the past at **Stanfield's General Store**. It has the hardware, homewares, and creaky floorboards that its name suggests, but its surprises—antiques, North Carolina-made foods, local art, and more—will make you linger.

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Back in Benson, browse handmade creations, vintage and antique furniture, collectibles, and farm-style décor at **Morgan's on Main**. Much of its inventory isn't listed on its website, making a visit worthwhile. It's a two-minute walk to **Salvaged Heirlooms**, which began selling refurbished, vintage, and handmade items as a pop-up shop. Enjoy craft beer, local wines, and quick bites to eat in its Lounge.

The local craft beer scene will be even bigger by the end of the year, when **Fainting Goat Brewing Co.** opens its expanded brewery and second taproom. While the new capacity will allow limited runs of specialty beers, you'll be able to still enjoy longtime

favorites including Der Hoof Hefeweizen, a light body German wheat, and seasonal offerings such as No Kidding Belgian Wit, a Belgian white.

Enjoy more libations at **Broadslab Distillery**, whose name comes from southeastern Johnston County's historical nickname. Learn about the owners, bootlegging, and modern distilling on its one-hour tour, which ends with a sampling of handcrafted products, from Legacy Shine white corn whisky to Carolina Coast Spiced Rum.

If you'd like one more history lesson before your trip ends, there's more to learn at the historic site's visitor center, starting with the 10-minute film that sets the Battle of Bentonville's stage. Afterward, view battlefield artifacts and trace troop movements on a large fiber-optic map, complete with narration and battle sounds. And grab a scavenger hunt list, which makes children's visits interactive.

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Next door, take a guided tour of Harper House, which predates the Civil War and served as a field hospital for some of the casualties during and after the battle. Then, download the **free smartphone app** for the 10-mile **driving tour** through the 6,000-acre battlefield, much of which has remained unchanged since March 1865.

Get out of the car and explore the battlefield's nearly four miles of trails, which made it one of USA Today's top 10 places to hike through Civil War history. Start with the nearly one-mile trail that begins across Mill Creek Church Road from the visitor center, following it to reconstructed field fortifications, a replica cannon, and the remains of

Union trenches.

But before you march across the battlefield, fill your stomach at family-owned **Cornerstone Café & Coffee** in Benson. Start with a coffee, espresso, or frappé made from rich and sweet Guatemalan beans. You can order its breakfast menu favorite—fluffy Belgian waffles topped with everything from fruit to candy—all day.

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