

Sherman's Revenge: Documentary Transcript

Prologue

"It was the most monstrous barbarity of the barbarous march."-Whitelaw Reid, 1868

They say that history is written by the victors. This is one small, yet significant, piece of Civil War history that the victors would have preferred not to have been told. Many historians mention it only briefly and sometimes not accurately. In his epic film documentary, "The Civil War", Ken Burns does not mention it at all. It is not a story of glorious battles and thousands of dead and wounded on bloody fields of valor. It is the story of how in times of war horrendous and militarily-unjustified things can happen to defenseless civilians and private property.

February 17, 1865, is singularly the most important day in the history of South Carolina and Columbia, the state's capital. On this day everything changed for the Palmetto State. Politically, economically, socially...nothing would ever be the same. It was the day the wealthy became poor and a beautiful city was destroyed. It was the real emancipation day for slaves in a powerful Southern state so closely associated with that now universally repudiated institution. No one was spared hardship and loss...neither the rich, the free blacks nor the slaves.

Accusations of responsibility were made and denied immediately after this dreadful day. A government hearing was held. However, the first-hand accounts of soldiers and civilians, who were part of this tragedy, paint a clear picture of events and motivations unfettered by historical interpretation and explanations. This is the true story of "the most monstrous barbarity of the barbarous march"

Part 1

In Early December of 1864, Major General William Tecumseh Sherman and his 65,000-man army reached the Atlantic Ocean concluding their successful and much-heralded "March to the Sea" through Georgia. As the Union general waited for the inevitable surrender of Savannah, the men in his ranks were guessing what their next move would be.[i]

But Sherman knew what he intended to do. He considered Charleston to be "a mere desolate wreck" following years of naval bombardment.[ii] On the other hand, Sherman thought that Columbia, South Carolina's capital, was just as "vital" to Confederate President Jefferson Davis as Richmond.[iii] Major George Ward Nichols, aid-de-camp to Sherman-"(Columbia) is the center of a number of railroads which stretch up into the most fertile and fruitful agricultural district in the South...It contains the largest printing establishment in the rebel states. ...Manufacturers of power, arms, cloths, and other materials are there. Columbia,

therefore, is a richer prize and more important capture than any city in the South.”[iv]

Columbia was also important to Sherman, his men and the North for another reason, for South Carolina was viewed as “the cause of their woes” and thoroughly deserved destruction.[v]

South Carolina, a southern political power, had twice before, in the early 1830’s and 1850’s, called on southern states to secede from the Union over the issues of tariffs and slavery. Then on December 17, 1860, a secession convention began in Columbia and three days later South Carolina became the first state to secede from the Union and was quickly followed by six other states. On April 12, 1861, the first shots of the war were fired at Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina.

Sherman had “no doubt whatever as to (his) future plans” after Savannah. “I have thought them over so long and well that they appear as clear as daylight. I left Augusta untouched on purpose, because the enemy will be in doubt as to my objective point, after crossing the Savannah river, whether it be Augusta or Charleston, and will naturally divide his forces.”[vi] Columbia was Sherman’s real target.

But on December 16, 1864, Sherman received a letter from Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant, commander -in-chief of the Union Army, dashing his plans. Grant directed Sherman to establish a base on the coast and “with the balance of (his) command, come (to Grant) by water with all dispatch.”[vii]

Sherman responded quickly with three letters to Grant within six days respectfully arguing for his plan. December 16 -“Indeed, with my present command I had expected, after reducing Savannah, instantly to march to Columbia, South Carolina, thence to Raleigh, and thence to report to you.”[viii] December 18 -“With Savannah in our possession, at some future time, if not now, we can punish South Carolina as she deserves...I do sincerely believe that the whole United States, north and south, would rejoice to have this army turned loose on South Carolina, to devastate that State... it would have a direct and immediate bearing on your campaign in Virginia.”[ix] December 22 -“I have now completed my first step, and should like to go on to you via Columbia and Raleigh...You know better than anybody else how much better troops arrive by land march than when carried by transport.”[x]

Ironically, two days after Grant wrote his letter to Sherman with the directive for a water route and before receiving Sherman’s first response, Grant changed his mind due to other military victories and the lack of available ships to transport Sherman’s army.[xi] On December 24, 1864, Sherman received the change in orders[xii] and immediately wrote to Major General Halleck in Washington saying that he was now “free to make a broad swath through South and North Carolina”. “The truth is, the whole army is burning with an insatiable desire to wreak vengeance upon South

Carolina. I almost tremble at her fate, but feel that she deserves all that seems in store for her.”[xiii]

By this time, Savannah had fallen peacefully.[xiv] Unlike Atlanta, which Sherman battled to win and then had evacuated before burning areas of the city, Savannah quietly surrendered and was unharmed.

Sherman now turned his attention to preparing for his march on Columbia. He planned to start on January 15, 1865,[xv] “but the rains...so flooded the country that (he was) brought to a standstill”.[xvi]

While Sherman’s army was deluged by water, most of Columbia’s residents 120 miles away continued to believe they were not at risk. The city’s population nearly tripled from its prewar size of 8,000 due to refugees and the assumption that Columbia would be protected from the Union army. Treasures of all kinds were sent to the city for safekeeping. [xvii]

Columbia also developed a reputation as “one of the Confederacy’s liveliest cities”[xviii]. At the end of 1864 and into the following year, “Columbia’s city hall was the setting of almost weekly concerts of various kinds.” While there were shortages of some goods, “luxuries of all sorts were for sale in local stores.”[xix]

On December 29, 1864, Columbia Mayor Thomas Goodwyn issued a call for fortifications to protect the city. But he received “few hands and fewer tools”.[xx] Instead, residents planned and held a great bazaar on January 17 in the old, wooden State House. This lavish three-day and four-night event raised money for charity and was attended by thousands including dignitaries from many southern states to dine on extravagant cuisine.[xxi] One attendee called it a “Southern achievement of genius.” “It seemed that ‘the world and his wife’ were there, and such a quantity of ‘gold lace’ never flourished before. If all had been coined-we would have helped many a poor private to their necessary apparel-of which they are now deficient...How the ‘Angels’ flourished and flaunted-in before the war’ finery”.[xxii]

While they danced and dined in Columbia, Sherman transported the right wing of his army by ship to Beaufort where the heavy rains made the roads impassable. “Mules and wagons actually (sank) out of sight.”[xxiii] Sherman joined General Oliver Howard in Beaufort on January 21[xxiv] while the left wing of his army, under the Command of General Henry Slocum, struggled through the rain up the flooding Savannah River. By January 24th the weather improved[xxv] and on January 30, 1865, “the actual invasion of South Carolina” began.[xxvi]

Not even the severely flooded swamps, impassable roads, Confederate fortifications, or resistance in the state’s lowcountry could slow Sherman’s troops. Bridges were built. Trees were cut and homes torn down for wood to corduroy the army’s path[xxvii] as 65,000 men and 2500 wagons[xxviii] moved forward at ten to twelve

miles a day.[xxix] Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston later said, “There had been no such army since the days of Julius Caesar.”[xxx]

“There was a grim determination on the part of the men in the ranks to visit a severe judgment on South Carolina...We practically burned a swath 60 miles wide across...The Commanders were powerless...This destruction of property was a matter of revenge.”[xxxi]-Private John C. Arbuckle, Company K, Fourth Iowa Veteran Volunteer Infantry

“The well known sight of columns of black smoke meets our gaze again; this time houses are burning, and South Carolina has commenced to pay an installment...on her debt to justice and humanity. With the help of God, we will have principal and interest before we leave her borders.[xxxii]...Where our footsteps pass, fire, ashes, and desolation follow in the path.”[xxxiii]-Major George Ward Nichols

As Sherman’s army was beginning this march, Confederate generals met near Augusta, Georgia, on February 2 to plan a defense. As Sherman expected, the Confederates divided their force, ordering many to protect Charleston. Reinforcements from General Lee in Richmond were requested but only South Carolina’s General Wade Hampton and a division of riders were dispatched to help.[xxxiv]

With Confederate forces out of position and out-manned, Sherman’s columns were now fast closing in on Columbia, averaging nearly fifteen miles a day.[xxxv] On February 13, having ravaged the countryside, destroyed the railroads, and burned the towns along their path, Sherman’s massive army was only twenty-one miles from Columbia. Sherman knew that only a small military force was present in the city and, thanks to his army’s maneuvering, many of its citizens still clung to the believe that the Union force was heading to either Augusta or Charleston.[xxxvi]

Part 2

In the early afternoon of February 15, the first and only substantial defense of Columbia met Sherman’s forces about 5 miles south of the city at Congaree Creek. For several hours, Confederate troops held their line of breastworks on the north side of the flooding creek. But by late afternoon, after wading through waist deep water and mud and flanking the defenders, Sherman’s men crossed the creek with few losses[xxxvii] and made camp within three miles of the city[xxxviii] with the Congaree River standing between them and Columbia.

While the opposing forces were fighting at Congaree Creek and with the sounds of battle clearly heard in the city, many Columbia residents were trying to flee by rail. Joseph LeConte received orders on February 10 to ship the chemical laboratory of the Confederate Nitrite Bureau from Columbia to Richmond. The boxes were sent to the depot on the 14th where they set until LeConte was able to get them on board a train the next morning. As the fighting at Congaree Creek was ending, LeConte went

to the depot again to see if his shipment had been sent. It had. "The depot is still crowded with people trying to get off. The panic is really frightful—women and children pleading to be taken aboard. It is difficult to see the surging, pleading mass and remain unmoved, it is difficult to resist the strong tide of human sympathy; still I try to remain calm. The authorities say there is no danger." [xxxix]

At about midnight, Confederate forces began a light shelling of the Union camp that lasted until morning. While only a few casualties were sustained, Sherman's men did not sleep well. At dawn on February 16, Sherman's "troops were again on the move and before nine in the morning the whole southern bank of the (Congaree) River (opposite Columbia) was in (their) possession." [xl]

"In all of our campaigns, no other city in the South awakened our interest and bad feeling as did this city of Columbia; and now, here it was, with all of its beauty and attractiveness, in full view; but, withal, this was the trouble, there attached to it the bad eminence of having been the first of Southern Capitols to lead off in unleashing the dogs of war...The sacrifice, blood and carnage of four years of war through which we had passed, were due to what first took place here in the city of Columbia. Judging from the temper and feeling of the men in the ranks, it was evident that a terrible day of retribution had at last come to this beleaguered and doomed city." [xli] – Private John C. Arbuckle

The bridge across the Congaree to Columbia was burned by retreating Confederate troops now quartered throughout the city. [xlii] Positioned at the burned bridge with his artillery unit was Union General William B. Hazen: "The town was already up, and in great alarm. The main street leading down to the bridge was filled with citizens and a sprinkling of cavalry, all rushing in evident excitement. Just across the river, at easy musket-range, were the cadets from the citadel working away like ants, with pick and spade, at a flank defense for the piers, to be used in case we should try to relay the bridge. They were such young things, –mere boys, –that I prohibited any firing upon them." [xliii]

General Hazen did order his battery to fire a few shots up the street at some cavalymen [xliv] while another battery on the hill overlooking Hazen's position opened fire on the trains leaving the station. [xlv] At about nine that morning, General Sherman arrived on the scene and directed the battery at the bridge to fire on the railroad station to disperse a crowd carrying away provisions. He then ordered Hazen's artillery crew to fire upon the new, granite State House under construction. [xlvi] "When the shells struck, we could see the brick and mortar fly." - Private John C. Arbuckle. [xlvii]

At the railroad station, the scene was frantic. "Car after car left with the officials of the treasury department, and hundreds of individuals who feared to be captured by the enemy." -Madame S. Sosnowski [xlviii] "I never saw such a crowd and rush, the car windows were smashed in, women and children pushed through, some head foremost, others feet foremost." [xlix] -Mary Darby de Treville

Not wanting to risk trying to cross the swollen Congaree under potential enemy fire, Sherman opted for a different route. The Congaree is formed by the Broad River to the north and the Saluda to the west. These rivers intersect at the north end of Columbia. Sherman sent his troops to the only remaining bridge into the city on the Broad River.

Along their path they found an abandoned Union officer prison camp, called Camp Sorghum^[i], which had been set up only four months earlier. “Here we spent part of a terrible winter exposed to the storm and rain. We had no shelter save such as we made at last of sticks and logs that we were allowed to carry in from neighboring wood. Our food was wretched, we had almost no clothing, and the weather was very bad nearly all the time. We were surrounded by a line of guards.-Union Officer S.H.M. Byers^[ii] The prisoners of Camp Sorghum had been evacuated on December 12, 1864, and moved to the open grounds of the lunatic asylum in Columbia where many escaped, including S.H.M. Byers, before being taken out of the city as Sherman approached Columbia.^[iii]

About noon on the February 16th, Sherman’s troops reached the Saluda River and “Columbia Mills, the largest manufactory in the south.”^[iv] The bridge across the Saluda had already been burned. By mid afternoon, pontoons were laid enabling a division to cross and approach the Broad River Bridge.^[v] But just as they arrived and even before all the retreating Confederate cavalry could cross, the bridge erupted in flames, having earlier been covered with rosin, tar, and turpentine.^[vi]

Waiting until dark, the Union army began their effort to cross the flooded Broad River in a pouring rain.^[vii] While Sherman’s Pontoon Corps struggled with their task, Confederate General G.T. Beauregard finalized arrangements for the remainder of his army to evacuate the city early the next morning, turning over the command to Columbia native General Wade Hampton.^[viii]

Part 3

On February 17 at 3 a.m.^[ix], a Union brigade was finally ferried across the river and with daylight began advancing on Columbia under the command of Colonel George Stone.^[x] The morning was “bright and beautiful”, but the soldiers were water-soaked and muddied, “having neither sleep nor breakfast.”^[xi] Engineers immediately began laying pontoons for a bridge while Generals Sherman, Howard, Blair, Logan and Hazen watched from a high bluff.^[xii]

At 10 o’clock, just as the pontoon bridge was being completed^[xiii], the city’s mayor and several other prominent citizens met Colonel Stone outside the city to surrender Columbia. They received assurances that the city would be unharmed^[xiv] a promise later reaffirmed by Sherman with the exception of some public government buildings.^[xv] At 10:30, Sherman led the rest of his occupying force across the bridge and headed straight for the city.^[xvi] At 11 a.m., as Stone’s

leading brigade entered Columbia on its main street[lxvi], the last of Hampton's men departed[lxvii] leaving a defenseless city of women, children and old men.

All the stores in Columbia, some of which had been looted by Confederate soldiers the previous night[lxviii], were closely built up for one mile down the city's main street[lxix], which leads to the old capital building and the new one under construction beside it.

Bales of cotton were placed down the middle of Main Street by Confederate forces in anticipation of an order to burn them so as to keep the cotton out of Union hands. While the order never came, some bales were reported smoldering or on fire as Sherman's troops entered the city. These were quickly controlled by Columbia residents.[lxx] There were no fires of significance when the city was surrendered.[lxxi]

The Stars and Stripes were raised over the State House dome and on top of the uncompleted State House, while "a heavy detail of men...was placed on patrol duty".[lxxii]

"We have conquered and occupy the capital of the haughty state that instigated and forced forward the treason, which has brought on this desolating war. The city which was to have been the capital of the Confederacy if Lee and the rebel hosts had been driven from Richmond is now overrun by Northern Soldiers." [lxxiii]-Major George Ward Nichols

David P. Conyngham, Union army correspondent for the New York Herald, described Columbia. "It was famed for its fine public buildings, its magnificent private residences, with their lovely flower gardens, which savored of Oriental ease and luxury. It is hard to conceive of a city more beautifully situated, or more gorgeously embellished, with splendidly shaded walks and drives, with flowers, shrubberies, and plantations...Most of its stores and public buildings were of brick, while most of the private residences were framed, neatly painted, with piazzas hanging with plants and creepers....unsurpassed in the elegance of their finish, the beauty of their grounds, and the luxury seemed to pervade the place." [lxxiv]

Conyngham witnessed Sherman's entrance into Columbia. "General Sherman, accompanied by several other generals, their staffs and orderlies, forming a brilliant cavalcade, rode into the city amidst a scene of the most enthusiastic excitement. Ladies crowded the windows and balconies, waving banners and handkerchiefs...Negroes were grouped along the streets, cheering, singing, and dancing in the wild exuberance of their new-born freedom...Ringing cheers and shouts echoed far and wide, mingled with the martial music of the bands as they played 'Hail, Columbia,' 'Yankee Doodle,' and other national airs. It was, indeed, an exciting scene..." [lxxv]

“The discipline of the soldiers, upon their first entry into the city, was perfect and most admirable. There was no disorder or irregularity on the line of march, showing that their officers had them completely in hand. They were a fine looking body of men, mostly young and of vigorous formation, well clad and shod, seemingly wanting for nothing...But, if the entrance into town and while on duty, was indicative of admirable drill and discipline, such ceased to be the case the moment the troops were dismissed.”-[lxxvi] Columbia resident James Gibbes

“This city was full of whisky and wine, and the colored people who swarmed the streets, set it out on the sidewalks by the barrel with the heads knocked in and tin cups provided; bottles and demijohns were passed liberally to the troops passing through the city to camp quarters.”[lxxvii]-Private John C. Arbuckle

As General Howard, whose troops were in charge of the city, established headquarters in a house near the university and went to sleep, General Sherman occupied a house not far away on the east side of town.[lxxviii] Both were some distance from the troops who had taken over the streets of the city.

Until now Columbia residents had hoped that their fate would be much like Savannah’s where there had been no great destruction of personal property.[lxxix] That hope quickly faded in the afternoon hours.

“Our first trouble came about an hour after the entrance, when two horsemen rode into the yard, and came into the house, saying they had come to look for arms....they ransacked the house and helped themselves to all the small things they fancied....At last they rode off, assuring us that they would call again. “[lxxx]-Harriott H. Ravenel

“About 2 to 3 P.M. the soldiers began breaking into the stores and banks...the plunder and destruction of valuable property was beyond description...I was passing the Bank of Charleston and the Commercial Bank of Columbia and found a squad of about fifty soldiers breaking them open and loading themselves with silver to the extent of their ability to carry....Every store in the city was sacked...there was a marked air of absence from all restraint and control.”[lxxxi]- James Gibbes

Out of fear for their property, residents began requesting Union guards for their homes and many were granted their requests.[lxxxii] Even the Ursuline Convent on Main Street, after repeated personal assurances of safety by Sherman and just as adamant warnings of doom by Union soldiers, finally requested and received guards from the general.[lxxxiii]

Although neither Sherman nor his officers issued orders for the firing of the city,[lxxxiv] some Union soldiers warned residents that Columbia would be burned and even described how rockets would signal for the destruction to begin.[lxxxv]

“Towards night, crowds of our escaped prisoners, soldiers, and negroes... were parading the streets in groups.”[lxxxvi]-David Conygham

Part 4

At dark, the night of terror began. As the signal officers of Sherman's divisions shot off rockets in standard practice to show their locations, fires began to break out all over the city and neighborhoods.[lxxxvii] Soldiers carried pots and vessels of turpentine, kerosene or other flammable liquid in which they dipped balls of cotton, lit them and flung the fire balls over and under houses.[lxxxviii] The troops charged with patrolling the streets did nothing to stop the rioting.[lxxxix]

"The streets were crowded with murdering groups of demons from all the corps in the army." [xc]-David Conyngham

"The boys...were spreading the conflagration by firing the city in a hundred places." [xci]-Captain S.H.M. Byers

"Universal license to burn and plunder was the order of the day." [xcii]-Union Officer Thomas G. Myers

"Such an awful sight! The...street filled with a throng of men, drunken, dancing, shouting, cursing wretches, every one bearing a tin torch or a blazing lightwood knot. The sky so dark a half hour before, was already glowing with light, and flames were rising in every direction." [xciii]-Harriott H. Ravenel

Sherman, who had just finished supper at his headquarters, stepped out into the yard, "saw the darkness lit up with the lurid hue of conflagration" and remarked, "They have brought it on themselves." [xciv]

Generals Howard and Hazen went quickly into the streets ordering soldiers to help fight the fire. Sherman joined them much later in the effort. [xcv]

"True, Generals Sherman, Howard, and others were out giving instructions for putting out a fire in one place, while a hundred fires were lighting all round them. How much better would it have been had they brought in a division or brigade of sober troops, and cleared out the town, even with steel and bullet!" [xcvi]-David Conyngham

The fierce wind, which had been blowing since about two that afternoon, was helping to spread the fire, making "a tornado of flame". Most efforts to stop the fire were futile. [xcvii] However, the area around General Howard's headquarters, including the buildings on the college campus being used as hospitals, was saved by the work of Union soldiers and hospital workers. [xcviii]

Pillaging continued throughout the city. Women and men, black and white were robbed of their valuables at gun and knife point. [xcix] Black women were raped. [c]

Soldiers pulled children about their beds while plunging long knives repeatedly between them into the mattresses looking for hidden treasures.[ci] Outside, hundreds of men were “probing the ground with their bayonets or iron ramrods, searching for buried treasures.”[cii]

“Such a scene...drunken soldiers, rushing from house to house, emptying them of their valuables, and then firing them...”[ciii]-David Conyngham

“A crowd had burst in and ... spread themselves over everything, and from that time until morning a roaring stream of drunkards poured through the house, plundering and raging, and yet in a way curiously civil and abstaining from personal insult.”[civ]-Harriott H. Ravenel

The streets were now also full of terrified women, children and old men seeking safety in the park, lunatic asylum and other open places to avoid the “devouring fire”.[cv]

“Many wandered about wringing their hands and crying; some sat stolid and speechless in the street watching everything that they had go to destruction.”[cvi] - Captain S.H.M. Byers

“Shrieks, groans, and cries of distress resounded from every side. Men, women, and children, some half naked, as they rushed from their beds, were running frantically about.”[cvii]-David Conyngham

“It was a most fearful night...The illumination was more brilliant than I am able to describe...Not only the glare of the flames, but the millions of sparks and cinders that filled the air all helped to make an illumination that far surpassed the brightness of day....The storm of fire...raged with unabated fury.”[cviii]-James Gibbes

At about 11 p.m., the students and most of the nuns at the Ursuline Convent fled to a nearby church. “We marched through the blazing streets with the precision of a military band....Father O’Connell led the procession, a crucifix held high above his head. The main body of nuns followed...then the pupils, the smaller between the larger for protection. Not a cry; not a moan. Even the drunken soldiers seemed silenced for a little while by this grand sight of Church triumphing over War! The roaring of the fire, the scorching flames on either side as we marched down Blanding Street...”[cix]-Sara Aldrich Richardson

Midnight came and a brigade of Union troops south of the city was finally sent into the streets to arrest disorderly soldiers and citizens. About 2500 men were arrested “including officers of nearly every grade...”[cx] Because he did not have a pass, even Captain Byers, who had been helping a family escape the fire, was taken into custody.[cxi] Other soldiers, like Private Abruckle who was aiding citizens in the streets reach safety, were allowed to remain in the city to help.[cxii]

Yet, the pillaging and burning continued by men “ruder and fiercer.”[cxiii]

The guards assigned to the Ursuline Convent began their own rampage of the building forcing the remaining nuns to leave. “Fire was falling so thick that it burned the veils and dresses of the nuns on their way to join their sisters in the graveyard” of the church nearby.[cxiv]

“About two o’clock in the morning, the house behind ours, and the one across the street, burnt down, and ours seemed in such danger that we took the four little children, whom we had kept in bed, and my mother took them across the street into the academy square, where many burnt-out people had taken refuge.”[cxv]-Harriott H. Ravenel

About 3 a.m., the cross above the Convent fell[cxvi] and an hour later the winds subsided.[cxvii] Then with the light, reveille sounded and the soldiers remaining in the city immediately returned to their ranks.[cxviii]

Part 5

“The 18th of February dawned upon a city of ruins...Nothing remained but the tall, spectre-looking chimneys. The noble-looking trees that shaded the streets, the flower gardens that graced them, were blasted and withered by fire. The streets were full of rubbish, broken furniture and groups of crouching, desponding, weeping, helpless women and children....That long street of rich stores, the fine hotels, the court-houses, the extensive convent buldings, and last the old capitol, where the order of secession was passed...were all in one heap of unsightly ruins and rubbish.”[cxix]-David Conyngham

“Groups of men, women, and children were gathered in the streets and squares, huddled together over a trunk, a mattress, or a bundle of clothes.”[cxx]-Major George Ward Nichols

“The city was a scene of smoldering ruin.”[cxxi]-Private John C. Arbuckle

“Around the charred ruin of their homes were grouped whole families, mourning and weeping over the terrible desolation. Who could see it and not feel that Justice had been avenged in this great curse on the city.”[cxxii]-Captain S.H.M. Byers

“The truth is, last night our men got beyond our control.”[cxxiii]-General Oliver Howard

“I have never doubted that Columbia was deliberately set on fire in more than a hundred places.”[cxxiv]-General William B. Hazen

On the morning of February 20, Sherman's army marched out of Columbia leaving behind 500 head of cattle in poor condition to feed the 7000 remaining residents.[cxxv] All public property surviving the fire had been destroyed except for the new capitol under construction, which Major George Ward Nichols thought was because it was such a beautiful work of art.[cxxvi] "The capital building is far from completion, but, if ever finished, it will be the most beautiful architectural creation in this country." [cxxvii]

Leaving with Sherman were thousands of refugees. "Old men, women and children, blacks and whites, rich and poor, on foot, with packs of every conceivable kind." [cxxviii]

Private John C. Arbuckle—"In the parks and other vacant places were gathered multitudes of the destitute and homeless. Truly it was a scene of appalling distress and suffering...As our columns went by, the people gave vigorous expression to their desire for revenge, hissed and hooted, called us vile names, swore at us, spit upon us, not a few of the women undertook to lay violent hands upon us. While we could not seriously blame them for their abusive words and acts, being mainly innocent sufferers; nevertheless, here was the spot where they had sown the wind, and now at last had come the whirlwind." [cxxix]

Major George Ward Nichols—"Columbia will have bitter cause to remember the visit of Sherman's army. Even if peace and prosperity soon return to the land, not in this generation nor the next-no, not for a century-can this city or the state recover from the deadly blow which has taken its life. It is not alone in the property that has been destroyed...that the most blasting, withering blow has fallen. It is in the crushing downfall of their inordinate vanity, their arrogant pride, that the rebels will feel the effects of the visit of our army." [cxxx]

On April 9, 1865, just fifty-one days after the burning of Columbia, Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox Courthouse in Virginia.

Epilogue

One-third of Columbia, SC, was destroyed in the fire of February 17, 1865. Over thirty-six square blocks, including all of city's business district and much of the upper class residential area, was reduced to rubble and ashes. Only one southern death was reported, a black male. A thriving city and economy was turned into a city on welfare over night.

On July 15, 1865, General Wade Hampton wrote of Sherman and his March through South Carolina: "For these deeds history will brand him a robber and incendiary and will deservedly 'damn him to everlasting fame.'"

However, the only official government investigation was the Commission formed by the United States and England to assess each country's charges that the other was

responsible for loss of property during the war. Regarding the burning of Columbia, in 1873 this Mixed Commission concluded that neither Federal nor Confederate officers were responsible for the intentional or unintentional fire that consumed the city.

For his part, Sherman was unapologetic. "If I had made up my mind to burn Columbia I would have burnt it with no more feeling than I would a common prairie dog village; but I did not do it..."

Credits

Voices provided by:

Tom Clark - Narration
Jack Silma - Sherman, Myers
Steve Harley - Nichols, Byers, Gibbes
Lou Kaplan - Conyngham
Paul Caughman - Arbuckle, LeConte
Ann Kelly - Ravenel, Sosnowski
Erwin Wilson - Richardson
Paul Whitten - Hazen, Howard
Catherine Bailey - Unknown Woman, de Treville

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Special thanks for invaluable assistance and much appreciated encouragement for this project goes to:

Tom Elmore
John Hammond Moore
Tom Shaw
Mike Bedenbaugh

Thanks for participation and support of the efforts leading up to this project goes to:

James "Boo" Alford
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