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SHERMAN AT CHERAW

LARRY E. NELSON*

"THE REGION OF COUNTRY HEREABOUT IS NOT OF MUCH VALUE to the enemy, either in a military or commercial point of view," wrote Brigadier General John H. Trapier from his headquarters at Georgetown, South Carolina, in the fall of 1863.¹ The Confederate commander was speaking specifically of the port at the mouth of the Great Pee Dee River and the adjacent seacoast, but his generalization applied to the entire Pee Dee region of South Carolina. For most of the Civil War, the Pee Dee flowed unmolested from its origin at the confluence of the Yadkin River and the Uwharrie River in North Carolina along a southeasterly course through northeastern South Carolina until reaching the coast at Winyah Bay. The comparative tranquility of the region came to an abrupt end during the last few months of the war when the arrival of Sherman's army at Cheraw dramatically changed strategic imperatives all along the Pee Dee River.

Throughout the Civil War, the principal military developments in the Pee Dee region and along the nearby seaboard were interrelated. The direct impact of the war fell first upon Georgetown and the coastal area at the mouth of the river where the Confederacy undertook defensive measures and where the routine of the Federal blockade soon began. The military situation at Georgetown contributed to the decision to locate a Confederate navy yard at Mars Bluff, about 100 miles upriver, where the C.S.S. *Pedee* was constructed. The apparent seclusion of the region from military events encouraged the establishment in 1864 of a prisoner of war camp at Florence, a few miles upstream from Mars Bluff. The port at Georgetown, the navy yard at Mars Bluff, and the internment camp at Florence attracted minimal Federal attention until early 1865 when Sherman's army began moving toward Cheraw, located on the Pee Dee just below the North Carolina border 170 miles above the river's mouth.² Sherman's advance changed everything. The Union navy moved against Georgetown; the commandant of the prison at Florence became anxious to move the prisoners out of Sherman's path; and the C.S.S. *Pedee* undertook its only combat assignment

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¹J. H. Trapier to T. Jordan, November 23, 1863, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Ser. I, Vol. XXVIII, Pt. II, 521, hereafter cited as ORA.

²For mileage along the Pee Dee River, see House Committee on Rivers and Harbors, *Examination and Survey of Great Pee Dee River, South Carolina*, 56th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1900, House Document No. 124, 3, 5.

Seminole Nation of Oklahoma
Seminole Tribe of Florida, Dania, Big Cypress
and Brighton Reservations
Seneca Nation of New York
Seneca-Cayuga Tribe of Oklahoma
*St. Regis Band of Mohawk Indians of New York⁸
Stockbridge-Munsee Community of Mohican Indians
of Wisconsin
Thlopthlocco Tribal Town of the Creek Nation of
Oklahoma
Tonawanda Band of Seneca Indians of New York
Tunica-Biloxi Tribe of Louisiana
*Tuscarora Nation of New York
*United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians of
Oklahoma
Wyandotte Tribe of Oklahoma

⁸As noted in the first part of this trilogy, a Mohawk band known as the Westo did live in South Carolina from 1670 to 1685, and the tiny Port Royal Band of Tuscarora was based in South Carolina.

of the Civil War. The central events of Sherman's march through the Pee Dee region were the clash of Federal and Confederate forces at Cheraw and vicinity, the hurried withdrawal of the Confederates across the Pee Dee River, and the occupation of Cheraw while the Federals bridged and crossed the Pee Dee.

Georgetown, centrally located in the rice growing region of South Carolina, was a minor port with a peacetime population of about 1,500. Although ships of the Federal blockading fleet patrolled the seas off Georgetown and although blockade runners sometimes made daring runs in and out of the port, Georgetown was not well suited to the wartime needs of the Confederacy. The main ship channel at the entrance of Winyah Bay was only eleven and one-half feet deep at normal high tide, significantly restricting the size of vessels that could enter. Transportation above the port was difficult because Georgetown had no direct railroad connection and sharp bends in the lower Pee Dee generally prevented ocean going ships from passing upriver. Cargoes arriving in Georgetown for shipment into the interior usually traveled up the Pee Dee in smaller boats to the Wilmington and Manchester Railroad bridge at Mars Bluff.³

For most of the war, Georgetown was poorly defended. In late 1861 engineers established shore batteries on islands near the entrance to Winyah Bay to repel invaders and to protect blockade runners using the port at Georgetown, but requirements for troops and for coastal artillery elsewhere in the Confederacy forced abandonment of these defenses in the spring of 1862. The Union navy soon discovered the lack of defenses in the lower bay and dominated the entrance for the remainder of the war. To command upper Winyah Bay, the Confederates constructed Battery White. Although never quite completed, the battery was well designed, admirably located, and eventually equipped with sufficient artillery to make it formidable, but the size of the garrison was inadequate. General Trapier, who had responsibility for the defense of Georgetown and the adjacent coastline, complained repeatedly that his resources were insufficient and warned that he could not repel a determined assault by even a modest enemy force. Neglecting Georgetown, the Confederacy concentrated scarce resources on the defenses at Wilmington, about 100 miles to the north, and at Charleston, about sixty miles to the south.⁴

³Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 9-13; George C. Rogers, Jr., *History of Georgetown County, South Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1970), 393, 394; J. H. Trapier to T. Jordan, November 23, 1863, ORA, Ser. I, Vol. XXVIII, Pt. II, 521.

⁴Rogers, *Georgetown County*, 394-400; J. H. Trapier to T. Jordan, November 23, 1863, ORA, Ser. I, Vol. XXVIII, Pt. II, 521; J. A. Dahlgren to Gideon Welles, February 28, 1865, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* (Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1894-1927), Ser. I, Vol. XVI, 273,

When the Department of the Navy at Richmond became interested in building a gunboat on the Pee Dee, the easy access of the Federal navy to Georgetown led to the decision to establish the navy yard upriver at Mars Bluff. The site was well above Georgetown and defended by artillery originally emplaced to protect the railroad bridge. Another advantage of the location was that construction materials could reach the navy yard by rail. Construction of the C.S.S. *Pedee* began in 1863, and after delays in acquiring machinery, the vessel was ready for service by early 1865. A wooden, screw gunboat, the *Pedee* measured 170 feet in length and twenty-six feet at the beam, drew ten feet of water, and carried a battery of five guns. Somewhat underpowered, the vessel was capable of nine knots under steam. Lieutenant Oscar F. Johnston was the commanding officer with a crew of some ninety sailors.⁵ One of the officers, who served in the Confederate navy from the beginning of the war, later said that the *Pedee* was "the best wooden ship built by the Confederacy" he ever saw.⁶

The naval construction on the Pee Dee River attracted the attention of Rear Admiral John A. Dahlgren, commander of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron. He ordered a reconnaissance of Confederate defenses at the mouth of the Pee Dee, and he obtained intelligence from a Unionist who fled to the protection of the Union navy from the region near Mars Bluff. After careful consideration, Dahlgren suggested to Gideon Welles, United States Secretary of the Navy, an audacious mission involving Union land and naval forces. Dahlgren proposed to seize Battery White, occupy Georgetown, and ascend quickly the Pee Dee River. If successful, the benefits of the operation would include destruction of the gunboat and the nearby railroad bridge. Nothing came of the proposal, but Dahlgren ordered ships blockading the entrance to Winyah Bay to take position in the channel and prevent the gunboat from escaping out to sea.⁷

Another reason for Dahlgren's proposed expedition up the Pee Dee was to reconnoiter the prisoner of war stockade at Florence. Although situated

hereafter cited as ORN; J. H. Trapier to T. Jordan, November 23, 1863, ORA, Ser. I, Vol. XXVIII, Pt. II, 521-22; J. H. Trapier to G. T. Beauregard, February 17, 1864, *ibid.*, Vol. XXXV, Pt. I, 617-18.

⁵Rogers, *Georgetown County*, 406; William N. Still, "Facilities for the Construction of War Vessels in the Confederacy," *Journal of Southern History*, XXXI (August 1965), 291; S. R. Mallory to W. G. Dozier, December 16, 1862, ORN, Ser. I, Vol. XIII, 817-18; J. H. Trapier to T. Jordan, January 26, 1864, ORA, Ser. I, Vol. XXXV, Pt. I, 546; S. R. Mallory, Report of Operations, April 30, 1864, ORN., Ser. II, Vol. II, 630, 638; S. R. Mallory, Report of Operations, November 30, 1864, *ibid.*, 532; S. R. Mallory, Report of Operations, November 5, 1864, *ibid.*, 746, 751.

⁶W. F. Clayton, *A Narrative of the Confederate States Navy* (Weldon: Harrell's Printing House, 1910), 106, 114.

⁷J. A. Dahlgren to G. Welles, ORN, Ser. I, Vol. XVI, 39-40; J. A. Dahlgren to N. B. Harrison, October 29, 1864, *ibid.*, 36.

near the Pee Dee, Florence was not a river town; it was a railroad town. Described by an unfriendly observer as a "railroad eating-house with sleeping-rooms attached," Florence was at the major railroad junction in the Pee Dee region. The Wilmington and Manchester Railroad passed through the town on an east-west axis while the Northeastern Railroad traversed the north-south axis from Charleston to Florence and the Cheraw and Darlington Railroad continued northward to Cheraw. Along the wide main street which fronted on the railroad tracks, the principal building was the two-story Gambel Hotel which catered to the needs of railway passengers. Behind the street in the piney woods were the twenty-five or thirty houses of the residents.⁸

The prison stockade, which was about one and one-half miles east of the town, came into existence during September 1864, shortly after Sherman's army took possession of Atlanta. Fearful that Sherman's troops would reach Union prisoners held at Andersonville, Confederate authorities began moving the prisoners to improvised facilities in Charleston and Savannah. Major General Samuel Jones, the commanding officer in Charleston, was anxious to get the prisoners out of the city and into a more secure location in the interior. He ordered the establishment of a prison camp at Florence and began sending prisoners from Charleston via the Northeastern Railroad even before the prison in Florence was ready. The Florence Stockade, over the several months of its operation, enclosed thousands of captive Union soldiers in remarkable squalor.⁹

Major General William T. Sherman and his army were in Savannah for Christmas 1864, and he moved his forces into South Carolina in January 1865. As Sherman prepared for the march through the Carolinas, he asked the Federal navy to stand ready to offer assistance at the seacoast. He specifically requested that Dahlgren secure the mouth of the Pee Dee River at Georgetown.¹⁰ The march was well underway by late January. The army,

⁸Sidney Andrews, *The South Since the War* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1866), 191-92. A Confederate veteran who passed through Florence on a troop train in 1863 remembered Florence "as a pretty little town in the piney woods." See John Coxe, "Chickamauga," *Confederate Veteran*, XXX (August 1922), 291.

⁹S. Jones to J. A. Seddon, September 12, 1864, *ORA*, Ser. II, Vol. VII, 817; William B. Hesseltine, *Civil War Prisons* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1930), 155, 167-68. For a history of the Florence Stockade, see G. Wayne King, "Death Camp at Florence," *Civil War Times Illustrated*, XII (January 1974), 35-42.

¹⁰W. T. Sherman to J. G. Foster, January 19, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. II, 97; J. A. Dahlgren, *Diary*, *ORN*, Ser. I, Vol. XVI, 364-65; L. C. Easton, Report, July 22, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. LIII, 46. The two most important monographs on Sherman's army in the Carolinas are John G. Barrett, *Sherman's March through the Carolinas*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1956), and Joseph T. Glatthaar, *March to the Sea and Beyond* (New York: New York University Press, 1985).

making its way through the swamps and across flooded streams enroute to Columbia, encountered no serious opposition from the badly scattered Confederate forces. During the advance, Sherman purposely bypassed Charleston, isolating the city and its garrison of 11,000 men commanded by Lieutenant General William J. Hardee. Under orders from General P. G. T. Beauregard and after consulting directly with President Jefferson Davis, Hardee regretfully and belatedly abandoned Charleston during the night of February 17 and the early morning of February 18.¹¹ Two days later and about 100 miles to the north, Sherman's triumphant army of 60,000 began its departure from the smoldering ruins of Columbia. Although neither commander knew the precise destination of the other, Hardee and Sherman were, in fact, engaged in a race for the covered wooden bridge over the Pee Dee River at Cheraw.

Situated in a plantation district, Cheraw stood on the right bank of the Pee Dee at the head of navigation. The bridge across the river and the railroad along the right bank enhanced the commercial significance of the town. Cotton and forest products passed through Cheraw down river to the coast and thence to world markets, and goods came upriver from coastal ports for transshipment by wagon into the interior. Along the broad streets of the town were churches, academies, a bank of regional significance, and comfortable homes. The population in the late winter of 1865, variously estimated at 2,000 to 4,000, included refugees from the low country seeking to escape the dangers of military activity along the seaboard.

Cheraw was overflowing with personal property and military supplies. The town was the remotest point in South Carolina accessible by railroad from the coast, and residents of the low country, hoping to store their belongings away from the ravages of war, sent personal valuables and household furnishings to Cheraw. At the same time, considerable quantities of cotton had accumulated in the town because of the blockade at the seacoast. Also arriving in Cheraw were arms, ammunition, and commissary stores of the Confederate government.¹²

Hardee's column traveled a route of 150 miles from Charleston through Moncks Corner, Kingstree, and Florence to Cheraw. Hardee's strategic

¹¹Davis to W. J. Hardee, February 14, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. II, 1181; G. T. Beauregard to R. E. Lee, February 16, 1865, *ibid.*, 1202; W. J. Hardee to S. Cooper, February 19, 1865, *ibid.*, Pt. I, 1071; J. E. Johnston to R. E. Lee, February 23, 1865, *ibid.*, Pt. II, 1257.

¹²George W. Nichols, *Story of the Great March* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1865), 200, 202; J. Fitzpatrick, Report, March 31, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. I, 723; Oscar L. Jackson, *Colonel's Diary* ([Pa.?]: Sharon, n.p., 1922), 190; David P. Conyngham, *Sherman's March through the South* (New York: Sheldon and Co., 1865), 351; Elijah P. Burton, *Diary of E. P. Burton* (Des Moines: The Historical Records Survey, 1939), 67.

objective was to join the Confederate forces which Beauregard was concentrating to oppose Sherman's army. A primary tactical objective for Hardee was to delay the Federal advance by disputing the crossing of the Pee Dee River as long as possible without endangering his own force. Although the railway facilitated the movement, mismanagement by railroaders and the wretched condition of the railroad caused long delays, and the available rolling stock was not adequate to transport the entire force and its equipment.¹³ Much of Hardee's column moved slowly over roads turned into quagmires by incessant rains. Flooding on the rivers added to the problems. "Another cause of delay and embarrassment," complained Hardee, "arises from a heavy rise in the Great Pedee and its tributaries, which has carried away some important bridges on the route, thus causing the wagons and artillery to go much out of the way."¹⁴ The head of the column reached Cheraw on February 25 when the rear was still in the low country crossing the Santee River.¹⁵

Lacking cavalry, Hardee sent scouts, selected from among staff officers and infantrymen at Cheraw, to determine the whereabouts and, if possible, the intentions of the enemy. While pondering fragmentary reports of Federal movements and wondering if Sherman intended to strike the Pee Dee River below Cheraw at Florence, Hardee hastily made preparations to defend Cheraw and the bridge over the Pee Dee River, at least until the remainder of his column arrived. One of the most likely approaches to Cheraw for the Federals was the Chesterfield road which entered Cheraw from the northwest. Chesterfield, a hamlet consisting of a few houses and the district courthouse, was situated about twelve miles from Cheraw.

¹³G. T. Beauregard to L. McLaws, February 18, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. II, 1217-18; G. T. Beauregard to W. J. Hardee, February 26, 1865, *ibid.*, 1281; G. T. Beauregard to W. Hampton, March 1, 1865, *ibid.*, 1300-01; Lafayette McLaws, Order Book, 1865, 7-8, Lafayette McLaws Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Robert W. Sanders, "A Long Hard March," *Confederate Veteran*, XXXIII (July 1925), 255; William W. Henry, *Kid Soldiers of the Sixties* (n.p.: n.p., 1915), 9-10, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina; W. J. Hardee to J. E. Johnston, February 28, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. I, 1072-73. General Joseph E. Johnston relieved Beauregard on February 25, 1865, assuming command of the Army of Tennessee and all troops in the Department of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida.

¹⁴W. J. Hardee to G. T. Beauregard, February 26, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. I, 1072. Heavy rains and consequent flooding during February and March are not unusual in the Pee Dee basin. See, House Committee on Rivers and Harbors, *Yadkin-Pee Dee River, N.C. and S.C.*, 73rd Cong., 1st Sess., 1933, House Document No. 68, 31, 91.

¹⁵McLaws, Order Book, 1865, 8; A. Schimmelfennig to W. L. M. Burger, February 25, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. II, 575.

Another obvious approach was the Camden road which entered Cheraw from the southwest. Both the Camden road and the Chesterfield road crossed Thompson's Creek that originated north of Chesterfield and flowed in a southeasterly direction behind Chesterfield and in front of Cheraw before emptying into the Pee Dee River south of Cheraw.¹⁶

When configuring the defenses of Cheraw, Hardee took advantage of the natural perimeter provided by Thompson's Creek, a substantial stream that in places was several feet deep and forty yards wide. About ten miles from Cheraw at the bridge on the Chesterfield road, Colonel John C. Fiser's brigade of Georgia infantry with a battery of light artillery entrenched on the left bank of the creek. Some four miles from Cheraw at the bridge on the Camden road, infantrymen constructed an extensive line of strong earthworks at a well chosen site on the right bank of the creek. They also established an advanced position about two miles farther down the road to protect an important cross roads. Only a brigade held the positions on the Camden road at first, but as more troops became available, Hardee increased the size of the defending force.¹⁷ He also made plans for burning the Pee Dee River bridge following the inevitable withdrawal of his corps across the river, but he did not make preparations for positioning troops on the left bank to contest Federal efforts to bridge and cross the stream.

The Federal army began leaving Columbia on February 20, and Sherman's orders were to move on Fayetteville, North Carolina, by way of Cheraw. The important crossing of the Pee Dee at Cheraw was 100 miles northeast of Columbia. With the cavalry on the left and in the front, the Left Wing (Twentieth Corps and Fourteenth Corps) and the Right Wing (Seventeenth Corps and Fifteenth Corps) marched along rain soaked roads

¹⁶W. J. Hardee to G. T. Beauregard, February 26, 1865, *ibid.*, 1282; McLaws, Order Book, 1865, 8-12; W. J. Hardee, "Memoranda of the Operations of my Corps," in Joseph E. Johnston, *Narrative of Military Operations* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1874), 581; Conyngham, *Sherman's March*, 351; James A. Padgett (ed.), "With Sherman Through Georgia and the Carolinas: Letters of a Federal Soldier," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, XXXIII (March 1949), 73; U. S. Department of War, *Atlas to Accompany the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1891-1895), Plate LXXX.

¹⁷J. G. Mitchell, Report, March 30, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. I, 510; F. P. Blair, Report, April 1, 1865, *ibid.*, 381; Matthew C. Butler, "Comrades, Ladies, and Gentlemen," July 27, 1899, *Confederate Veteran*, VIII (January 1900), 32; O. O. Howard to W. T. Sherman, March 3, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. II, 661; M. C. Garber, Report, July 10, 1865, *ibid.*, Vol. LIII, 54; D. H. Poole, Special Orders, February 27, 1865, *ibid.*, Vol. XLVII, Pt. II, 1284; J. C. Rogers, Report, March 28, 1865, *ibid.*, Pt. I, 621; Thomas W. Osborn, *Fiery Trail* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986), 162; McLaws, Order Book, 1865, 13-17; F. P. Blair, Report, April 1, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. I, 381.

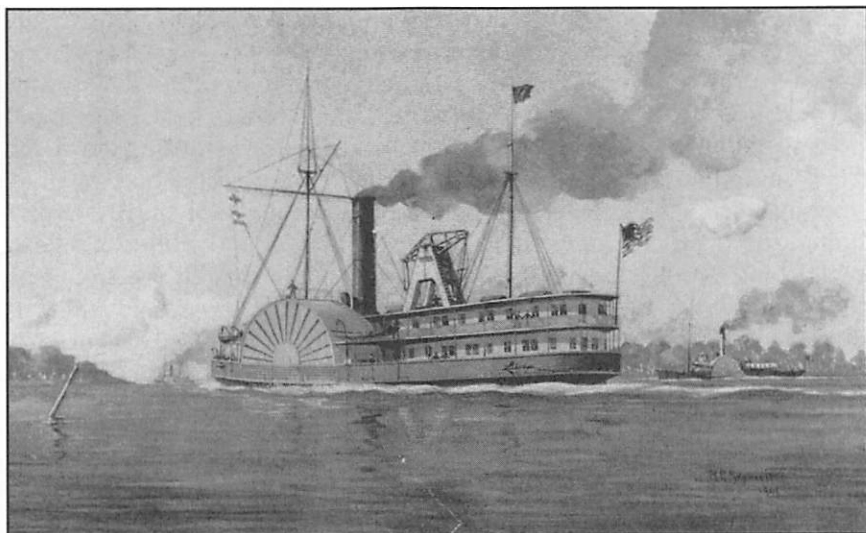
and crossed over flooded rivers in the upper Santee River basin. Confederate cavalry skirmished frequently with Union cavalry and infantry while reporting uncertainty about the route and destination of the Federal army. Muddy roads and swollen streams were a far greater impediment to the advancing Federals than was the Confederate cavalry. Delayed at the crossing of the Catawba River due to flooding, the Fourteenth Corps, with the all important pontoon train for the Left Wing, fell several days behind the rest of the army. Sherman learned during the march that a Confederate force was gathering at Cheraw, but reports on the size and leadership of that force were contradictory. In any case, Sherman knew that his army was vastly superior to any which the Confederates could muster at Cheraw.¹⁸

About the time Sherman's army departed Columbia, a flotilla dispatched by Admiral Dahlgren sailed into Winyah Bay with intentions of subduing Battery White and seizing Georgetown. The port had at last become important to Union purposes. Upon the approach of the Federal ships, the tiny garrison of Battery White spiked the guns and fled. Suspecting that the defenders had abandoned their position, Commander J. Blakeley Creighton of the U.S.S. *Mingoe* approached cautiously, shelled the battery but received no counter fire, and sent ashore a landing party which occupied the fort. Federal forces proceeded past the silent battery and took possession of the town, encountering only brief resistance from a small squad of Confederate horsemen. City officials formally surrendered Georgetown February 25, 1865. The sole reason the Federal navy finally seized the port at the mouth of the Pee Dee River was to open the possibility of communication with Sherman in the event he required it.¹⁹

Admiral Dahlgren paid a brief visit to Georgetown soon after its capture, and the waters of Winyah Bay held one more terror for him as he departed. Steaming down the bay, his flagship, U.S.S. *Harvest Moon*, struck an undetected Confederate torpedo. The admiral described the sequence of events:

¹⁸W. T. Sherman, Special Field Orders, No. 26, *ibid.*, Pt. II, 445; C. R. Woods to M. Woodhull, February 26, 1865, *ibid.*, 584; A. M. Van Dyke to F. P. Blair, February 27, 1865, *ibid.*, 598; F. P. Blair to A. M. Van Dyke, February 28, 1865, *ibid.*, 611-12; O. O. Howard to W. T. Sherman, February 28, 1865, *ibid.*, 608.

¹⁹J. A. Dahlgren to Gideon Welles, February 28, 1865, ORN, Ser. I, Vol. XVI, 273; J. B. Creighton to J. A. Dahlgren, February 24, 1865, *ibid.*, 276; H. S. Stellwagen to J. A. Dahlgren, February 24, 1865, *ibid.*, 275-76; A. K. Noyes to J. A. Dahlgren, February 25, 1865, *ibid.*, 276-77; R. O. Bush, G. F. B. Leighton, *et al.* to J. A. Dahlgren, February 25, 1865, *ibid.*, 275; J. A. Dahlgren to H. S. Stellwagen, February 28, 1865, *ibid.*, 279.



Admiral Dahlgren's flagship, U.S.S. *Harvest Moon*, struck a mine in Winyah Bay shortly after the capture of Georgetown. This illustration appeared in the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*.

I was waiting breakfast in the cabin, when instantly a loud noise and shock occurred, and the bulkhead separating the cabin from the wardroom was shattered and driven in toward me. A variety of articles lying about me were dispersed in different directions. My first impression was that the boiler had burst. . . . The smell of gunpowder quickly followed and gave the idea that the magazine had exploded.

In a masterpiece of understatement, he added, "There was naturally some little confusion, for it was evident that the vessel was sinking."²⁰ Within five minutes the ship sank in two and one-half fathoms of water. Dahlgren and all of the officers and crew, save one, managed to escape with their lives.²¹

About 125 miles northwest of Georgetown, Sherman's troops entered the Pee Dee drainage basin toward the end of February, and the first formidable stream they encountered was Lynch's River. Some crossings on this tributary to the Pee Dee River were swollen to three-quarters of a mile, which caused delays. Major General Frank P. Blair managed to get his Seventeenth Corps across Lynch's River well ahead of the rest of the army.

²⁰J. A. Dahlgren to G. Welles, March 1, 1865, *ibid.*, 283.

²¹Abstract of Log, U. S. S. *Harvest Moon*, March 1, 1865, *ibid.*

Moving on the Camden road, he was within thirteen miles of Cheraw by February 28. The Twentieth Corps crossed Lynch's River on March 1 and the next day advanced toward Chesterfield.²²

Joining Hardee in Cheraw was Major General Matthew C. Butler and his cavalry division that had shadowed the Federal army during the march from Columbia. Under orders from Hardee, Butler posted pickets along Thompson's Creek and went with Major General Pierce M. B. Young's brigade of cavalry to Chesterfield. With the infantry and artillery a mile or two behind Chesterfield on the left bank of Thompson's Creek defending the bridge, Butler moved about two miles in front of Chesterfield where he deployed a strong line of dismounted cavalry behind a breastwork of fence rails.²³

As both wings of Sherman's army converged in the vicinity of Cheraw, events moved rapidly. On the afternoon of February 28, mounted infantry from the Seventeenth Corps prodded the Confederate defenses on the Camden road. Two days later, skirmishers drove the Southerners from their advanced position, but Blair remained entrenched and waited while the Fifteenth Corps struggled across Lynch's River and moved within supporting distance. During the afternoon of March 2, the lead brigade of the Twentieth Corps, moving on the road from Lynch's River toward Chesterfield, came under sharp fire from the Confederate breastworks outside the town. Two infantry regiments, supported by the rest of the brigade and by artillery, deployed as skirmishers and advanced. A running fight ensued as the Federals drove the Confederates from their breastworks through the town to Thompson's Creek. Partially burning the bridge, the retreating cavalry joined the infantry and artillery already entrenched behind the stream. A brief artillery duel developed, and sharpshooters on both banks continued firing until evening when the Federals posted pickets and fell back about one-quarter mile with intentions of forcing a crossing on the following morning.²⁴

²²O. O. Howard to W. T. Sherman, March 2, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. II, 644; J. A. Logan to A. M. Van Dyke, February 26, 1865, *ibid.*, 583; W. T. Sherman to H. W. Slocum, March 3, 1865, *ibid.*, 667; F. P. Blair, Report, April 1, 1865, *ibid.*, Pt. I, 381; A. M. Van Dyke to F. P. Blair, March 1, 1865, *ibid.*, Pt. II, 632; W. T. Sherman to O. O. Howard, March 1, 1865, *ibid.*, 628.

²³M. C. Butler to W. J. Hardee, February 27, 1865, *ibid.*, 1288; F. P. Blair to A. M. Van Dyke, February 28, 1865, *ibid.*, 611-12; Butler, "Comrades," 32; N. J. Jackson, Report, March 29, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. I, 599.

²⁴F. P. Blair to A. M. Van Dyke, February 28, 1865, *ibid.*, Pt. II, 612; J. E. Johnston to R. E. Lee, March 2, 1865, *ibid.*, Pt. I, 1052; McLaws, Order Book, 1865, 13-15, 17-18; F. P. Blair, Report, April 1, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. I, 381; Butler, "Comrades," 32; Padgett (ed.), "With Sherman," 73; J. L. Selfridge, Report, March 28, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. I, 610-11; N. J. Jackson, Report, March 29, 1865, *ibid.*, 599; A. S.

With the Twentieth Corps poised to overrun the Confederate position on the Chesterfield road and with the Seventeenth Corps positioned to assault the defenses on the Camden road, Hardee held a council of war on the evening of March 2 with his ranking subordinates, including Butler who had just returned from Chesterfield. Virtually all of the Confederate column had reached Cheraw from the south, and after discussion, Hardee rightly concluded that the only viable option was withdrawal. He ordered the artillery and supply trains to begin moving as soon as possible to the left bank of the Pee Dee. The troops guarding the Chesterfield road were to withdraw four miles, but the infantry in Cheraw and those on the Camden road were to retire and follow the trains across the Pee Dee. With tar and pitch, readily available from the nearby forest industry, engineer troops prepared the bridge over the Pee Dee for burning. Hardee had no choice but to abandon most of the supplies in Cheraw. Even if his supply trains had been in excellent condition, which they were not, he did not have enough wagons to transport the immense quantity of material which had reached the town by river and rail. He also determined to leave behind several hundred ill and wounded soldiers with their attending surgeons. Through the night of March 2 and the early morning of March 3, thousands of soldiers and their trains moved across the bridge to the left bank of the Pee Dee. As the sun rose, the evacuation was virtually complete.

Butler and his command, assigned as the rear guard, remained on the right bank. The brigade of infantry and the brigade of cavalry were still on the Chesterfield road, and cavalymen lightly defended the position on the right bank of Thompson's Creek on the Camden road. The orders from Hardee to Butler were to hold the bridge on the Camden road until mid-morning in the expectation that additional cavalry might arrive from Florence. Finally, Butler was to set fire to the Camden road bridge which had been prepared with rosin, torch the abandoned stores in Cheraw, withdraw across the Pee Dee River, and burn the coveted river bridge.²⁵

Unaware of the Confederate retreat, Sherman weighed the possibilities from his headquarters at Chesterfield. He was now convinced that the enemy force at Cheraw consisted only of the garrison from Charleston commanded by Hardee. Sherman was eager to attack Cheraw before the Southerners could further strengthen their positions, but he was not

Williams, Report, March 31, 1865, *ibid.*, 584; J. B. Stephens, Report, March 25, 1865, *ibid.*, 854; J. C. Rogers, Report, March 28, 1865, *ibid.*, 621-22; W. Merrell, Report, March 26, 1865, *ibid.*, 629.

²⁵McLaws, Order Book, 1865, 18-19; Butler, "Comrades," 32; Burton, *Diary*, 67; W. J. Hardee to J. E. Johnston, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. II, 1320; W. T. Sherman to H. W. Slocum, March 5, 1865, *ibid.*, 691; F. J. Hurlbut, Report, April 7, 1865, *ibid.*, Pt. I, 363; Conyngham, *Sherman's March*, 351.

particularly apprehensive about Southern resistance in the town because he believed Hardee had neither the means nor the intention to mount a substantial defense. Sherman's greater concern was that the Confederates would hold fortified positions on the left bank contesting Federal efforts to cross the Pee Dee which was several hundred feet wide and too deep to ford at Cheraw. "We may," he mused, "have to cross the Pedee with a serious enemy in front."²⁶ As he recognized, a comparatively small force, well handled, could significantly harass and delay the Federal crossing.²⁷ "Let us get across the Pedee at all hazards as soon as possible," he concluded.²⁸ "Once across the Pedee, I don't fear the whole Confederate Army, for if need be we can swing in against the right bank of Cape Fear [River] and work down till we meet our people."²⁹ Desiring to avoid the need to lay pontoons but recognizing that the retreating enemy might destroy the Pee Dee bridge, Sherman said, "I hardly hope to save the bridge across the Pedee at Cheraw, but it is worth the effort."³⁰ "I want the Right Wing to move straight on Cheraw," he ordered, "and secure if possible the bridge across the Pedee."³¹

The Federal troops began their assault on the morning of March 3, not knowing that the Confederate retreat was underway. Forging Thompson's Creek well upstream and without opposition, a brigade of the Twentieth Corps flanked the Confederate defenses at the bridge on the Chesterfield road. The flankers moved down the left bank only to discover that the Southerners had quietly abandoned their position during the night. A division of the Twentieth Corps started across the stream and began cautiously moving along the Chesterfield road toward Cheraw. The Confederate infantry, Fiser's brigade of Georgians, had withdrawn first, followed by Young's cavalry brigade. Fiser's brigade was on the Chesterfield road within a few miles of Cheraw at daybreak.³²

On the Camden road, the Seventeenth Corps began its advance with Major General Joseph A. Mower, a particularly aggressive officer,

²⁶W. T. Sherman to O. O. Howard, March 1, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. II, 628.

²⁷William T. Sherman, *Memoirs* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1875), II, 271; William T. Sherman to Pleasant A. Stoval, October 21, 1888, *Confederate Veteran*, XXII (August 1914), 369.

²⁸W. T. Sherman to H. W. Slocum, March 3, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. II, 668

²⁹W. T. Sherman to O. O. Howard, March 3, 1865, *ibid.*, 661, 662.

³⁰W. T. Sherman to F. P. Blair, March 3, 1865, *ibid.*, 666.

³¹W. T. Sherman to F. P. Blair, March 1, 1865, *ibid.*, 631.

³²J. S. Robinson, Report, March 27, 1865, *ibid.*, Pt. I, 663; N. J. Jackson, Report, March 29, 1865, *ibid.*, 599; J. C. Rogers, Report, March 28, 1865, *ibid.*, 622; A. S. Williams, Report, March 31, 1865, *ibid.*, 584; W. H. Andrews, *Footprints of a Regiment* (Atlanta: Longstreet Press, 1992), 166.

commanding the lead division. In the expectation that the Confederates would burn the existing bridge over Thompson's Creek, the First Regiment Michigan Engineers followed Mower's division to bridge the stream once both banks were under Union control. The skirmish line moved forward anticipating stiff resistance at the earthworks on the right bank of the creek but encountered only light opposition from Butler's withdrawing cavalry. The Southerners set fire to the bridge, but the rapidly moving Federal infantry stamped out the flames and saved the structure. Securing the bridge was a significant turn of events in favor of the advancing Union troops. With the bridge intact, large numbers of infantrymen and supporting artillery moved over Thompson's Creek without delay. Although offering resistance, Butler's cavalry withdrew in haste, and the Federal troops pressed the attack in the new found hope that Hardee's entire corps was in retreat. As the Federal soldiers pushed to the outskirts of Cheraw, the Confederate defenders from Chesterfield arrived in time to join in the rear guard effort. Fiser's Georgians fought a brief but sharp delaying action at the edge of Cheraw while Young's cavalry dashed along the Chesterfield road into Cheraw. Even so, forty-six men were cut off but managed to escape and finally forded the Pee Dee several miles upriver.³³

Skirmishing heavily, Mower's division entered the town and pushed for the bridge over the Pee Dee. The fighting was house to house in places. A Georgia infantryman recalled: "We had a running fight through the town. The screams of the women and children, the report of the rifles, and the familiar zip of the minie balls made it a scene not to be forgotten soon."³⁴ To slow Federal progress, Butler deployed his force across the wide streets while withdrawing toward the river. Union artillery opened fire on the hard pressed Confederates who were without cannon.³⁵ Regarding the effectiveness of the Federal artillery, Edward Wells, one of Butler's cavalrymen, reported: "My horse was killed under me by a cannon ball in one of the streets, the shot passing through him from side to side. I was not at all hurt, my leg only slightly jarred, & splashed with blood from my horse, & my sabre slightly bent by being struck by the ball, as it passed out of the

³³F. P. Blair, Report, April 1, 1865, *ibid.*, 381; O. O. Howard, Report, April 1, 1865, *ibid.*, 202; Butler, "Comrades," 32; Andrews, *Footprints*, 166; W. J. Hardee to J. E. Johnston, March 4, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. II, 1320; C. Cadle, Special Orders No. 56, March 2, 1865, *ibid.*, 650; McLaws, Order Book, 1865, 19-21.

³⁴Andrews, *Footprints*, 166.

³⁵F. P. Blair, Report, April 1, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. I, 381; O. O. Howard, Report, April 1, 1865, *ibid.*, 202; Butler, "Comrades," 32; W. J. Hardee to J. E. Johnston, March 4, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. II, 1320; W. T. Sherman to F. P. Blair, March 3, 1865, *ibid.*, 666; McLaws, Order Book, 1865, 19-21; Osborn, *Trail*, 163.

horse."³⁶ Sergeant W. H. Andrews of the First Georgia Regulars commented on the consequences of the Federal artillery for the retreating Confederate infantry, "My but it was terrible, as it taken the regiment lengthwise." With grim humor he added, "The rapid fire of the artillery and the shells bursting in our midst made us have a hankering for the opposite bank of the river."³⁷ In the confusion and haste, the retiring troops had little opportunity to burn the stores abandoned in Cheraw.

The skirmishing at the bridge was desperate. Union troops fought to reach and seize the bridge while the Confederates battled to hold the Northerners in check long enough to escape to the left bank of the Pee Dee and set the bridge ablaze. Sergeant Andrews was among the last Confederates withdrawing across the bridge. "Before we had got more than halfway [over] the bridge," he wrote, "the yankees entered behind us. We had a lively time as we fought through the bridge, some cavalymen firing the rosin as we fought through. . . . We left the bridge on fire and full of yankees trying to put it out."³⁸ An Ohio regiment rushed the bridge while other Federal troops brought artillery and musket fire to bear upon Confederates whom Butler had hastily ordered into position to defend the bridge from the left bank. The Southerners stubbornly held their ground and kept the Federal troops at bay until flames engulfed the structure. Throughout the remainder of the afternoon, Butler's cavalry, joined by infantry and artillery, fired across the river on Federal troops who returned musket and cannon fire with alacrity. Shortly after sundown, the shooting stopped.³⁹

Before the fighting at the river ended, Cheraw was under Union control, and Federal commanders moved quickly to consolidate their position on the right bank. Major General O. O. Howard, commanding the Right Wing, sent word to the elements of the Twentieth Corps advancing on the Chesterfield road that Cheraw was in Union hands. Imposing martial law on the inhabitants of the town, he posted a provost guard and ordered a house to house search to gather commissary stores for the army. An inventory of captured supplies and weapons also began. General Blair ordered a regiment from his command to destroy all railroad bridges and trestles within a day's march south of Cheraw, and Major General John A. Logan, who commanded the Fifteenth Corps, organized a mounted force

³⁶Edward L. Wells to Mrs. Thos. L. Wells, May 1, 1865, in Daniel E. H. Smith, *et al.* (eds.), *Mason Smith Family Letters, 1860-1868* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1950), 202.

³⁷Andrews, *Footprints*, 167.

³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹F. P. Blair to L. M. Dayton, March 3, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. II, 666; Jackson, *Diary*, 189; W. J. Hardee "Memorandum," 581; Butler, "Comrades," 32; McLaws, *Order Book*, 1865, 21.

for a strike on Florence.⁴⁰

Another concern for the Federals was the C.S.S. *Pedee* that was on the river just below Cheraw. The gunboat was engaged in its only combat mission of the Civil War. As the confrontation between Hardee and Sherman began to develop at Cheraw, Lieutenant Johnston received orders to proceed from Mars Bluff up the Pee Dee River in support of Hardee. Even with the flooding, the crewmen had difficulty finding an adequate channel in which to maneuver their ship. They managed to bring the craft within a few miles of Cheraw and remained until the Federal troops arrived but were unable to assist Hardee's forces. A report that the *Pedee* had exploded about six miles below Cheraw apparently ended Federal apprehensions. In fact, the warship was still afloat and returning to the sanctuary of the navy yard at Mars Bluff.⁴¹

The principal concern for Sherman immediately after the capture of Cheraw was the situation on the opposite side of the river. Early reports indicated that the Confederates were on the left bank in force.⁴² Eager to establish a Federal presence, Sherman ordered, "Make a crossing of and lodgement beyond the Pedee with all possible dispatch, as it is all important we at once hold its left bank."⁴³ Troops ferried across the river before sunrise on the morning following the capture of Cheraw discovered that the main body of the Confederate army, including the rear guard, had withdrawn, leaving behind pickets who were content simply to monitor Federal progress.⁴⁴ Now, only the implacable Pee Dee River barred the Federal advance, but the delay was, as it turned out, just a matter of days.

With a smaller force and with the advantage of the railroad, Hardee had narrowly won the race for the bridge at Cheraw. He held the town long enough to accomplish his strategic objective of bringing his corps from Charleston and moving it across the Pee Dee as part of the broader Confederate effort to concentrate a sizeable force. By holding the town as

⁴⁰Osborn, *Trail*, 163; Second Brigade, First Division, 17th Corps, Itinerary, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. I, 96; F. J. Hurlbut, Report, April 7, 1865, *ibid.*, 363; C. Cadle, Jr., Special Order No. 57, March 3, 1865, *ibid.*, Pt. II, 667; C. Cadle to G. A. Smith, March 4, 1865, *ibid.*, 680; A. M. Van Dyke to F. P. Blair, March 4, 1865, *ibid.*, 679; J. A. Logan, Report, March 31, 1865, *ibid.*, Pt. I, 230.

⁴¹J. A. Mower to C. Cadle, March 4, 1865, *ibid.*, Pt. II, 680; Clayton, *Narrative*, 106; Osborn, *Trail*, 163; Burton, *Diary*, 67; W. T. Sherman to H. W. Slocum, March 4, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. II, 681.

⁴²F. P. Blair to L. M. Dayton, March 3, 1865, *ibid.*, 666.

⁴³L. M. Dayton to O. O. Howard, March 3, 1865, *ibid.*, 662.

⁴⁴Osborn, *Trail*, 165; C. Cadle to J. A. Mower, March 3, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. II, 667; M. C. Butler to B. Bragg, March 5, 1865, *ibid.*, 1329; G. P. Buell, Report, March 25, 1865, *ibid.*, Pt. I, 467.

long as he did and by destroying the bridge upon his departure, Hardee largely fulfilled his tactical goal of slowing Sherman. Had Hardee exploited the strength of his position on the left bank to dispute the Federal crossing, he could have imposed additional difficulty and delay on the Union army. Instead, he left the river and hastened to join the Confederate force gathering in North Carolina. Later, at Avera'sborough and at Bentonville, Sherman's Left Wing would feel the impact of Hardee's corps, but in the meantime, the Federal army had unchallenged access to the crossings of the Pee Dee.

George W. Nichols, aide-de-camp to Sherman, recorded his astonishment at the lack of Confederate resistance from across the river. "It is foolish for the Rebels to destroy their valuable bridge when they do not defend the other bank," he wrote. "When they do not prevent our laying pontoons by a more active opposition than we have yet encountered, the delay to us is merely a matter of a few hours. . . . It is incomprehensible to me that the Rebels do not make a more obstinate resistance to our passage of a stream like the Pedee."⁴⁵

Destroying the bridge, the same observer remarked, "is a serious matter to the people."⁴⁶ The irony of an officer in Sherman's army expressing sympathy for the misfortune of South Carolinians upon the destruction of a crucial bridge by Confederate troops seems to have escaped Nichols, but of course, the loss of the bridge was a blow to the local economy. In any event, if the retreating Confederates had not burned the bridge, the advancing Federals would have destroyed it after they had passed over the river.

Major General Judson Kilpatrick's cavalry, screening the left flank of the Union army, clashed with Confederate cavalry still on the west side of the Pee Dee in North Carolina. Lieutenant General Wade Hampton's cavalry skirmished with a portion of the Federal cavalry on the evening of March 3, and Major General Joseph Wheeler mounted an attack on Kilpatrick that lasted much of the day on March 4. The Union cavalry began moving down river the next day in the expectation of crossing the Pee Dee on a pontoon bridge. Hampton and Wheeler led their cavalry north in search of a crossing and finally crossed about three days later in the vicinity of Grassy Island Ford, approximately twenty-two miles above Cheraw. Some Confederate horsemen drowned in the perilous crossing.⁴⁷

Sherman ordered his Right Wing to cross the Pee Dee at Cheraw and the Left Wing and Kilpatrick's cavalry to cross about twelve miles upstream in

⁴⁵Nichols, *Great March*, 200.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷G. E. Spencer, Report, March 30, 1865, ORA, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. I, 893-94; J. Wheeler, Report, [April 15, 1865], *ibid.*, 1130; W. Hampton to W. J. Hardee, March 7, 1865, *ibid.*, 1111; William C. Dodson, *Campaigns of Wheeler and his Cavalry, 1862-1865* (Atlanta: Hodgins Publishing Company, 1899), 343; Johnston, *Narrative*, 380.

the vicinity of Sneedsborough, North Carolina. The engineers assigned to each wing were to lay at each location the necessary pontoon bridge: a deck and supporting joists riding on pontoon boats, canvas covered wooden frames, anchored at intervals across the flooding river. The only undertaking more dangerous than crossing on such a bridge was building it. The First Missouri Engineers, pontoniers for the Right Wing, set to work on the morning of March 4 just down stream from the charred ruin of the old bridge. At that point the current was swift and deep, but the high shelving banks restricted the width of the river to about 500 feet. With additional pontoons and bridging materials sent forward by the Fifteenth Corps, the engineers skillfully completed their work by mid-afternoon.⁴⁸

From the outset, problems plagued the bridge near Sneedsborough. Construction was late in starting because the Fifty-eighth Indiana Infantry, serving as engineers for the Left Wing, did not reach the Pee Dee with the pontoon train until noon on March 5. Pegues Ferry, the site selected for the bridge, was three miles below Sneedsborough and posed significant engineering challenges because at that location the current was strong and the river was 920 feet wide. The Fifty-eighth Indiana, not mustered into service as an engineering unit, had acquired its skills through practical experience. While adept at some aspects of combat engineering, the regiment had a record of difficulty with pontooning.⁴⁹ The work began in the early afternoon of March 5 and continued for twenty-six hours. "The men worked all night," wrote one of the pontoniers, "but on account of the rapidity of the stream and considerable difficulty in getting anchors to hold we progressed slowly."⁵⁰ When the supply of pontoons was exhausted, the engineers took the boxes of army wagons, wrapped the sides and bottom of each with a canvas wagon cover, and anchored these ersatz pontoons in the river. Inadequacies of leadership aggravated the problems, but the barely

⁴⁸Hartwell Osborn, *et al.*, *Trials and Triumphs* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1904), 194; O. M. Poe, Report, October 8, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. I, 169; F. P. Blair, Report, April, 1, 1865, *ibid.*, 381; Conyngham, *Sherman's March*, 354; Osborn, *Trail*, 168; A. M. Van Dyke to J. A. Logan, March 3, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. II, 663; J. A. Mower to C. Cadle, March 4, 1865, *ibid.*, 680.

⁴⁹2nd Brigade, 1st Division, 14th Corps, Itinerary, *ibid.*, Pt. I, 109-10; J. C. Davis, Report, March 28, 1865, *ibid.*, 431-32; Clement Eaton (ed.), "Diary of an Officer in Sherman's Army Marching through the Carolinas," *Journal of Southern History*, IX (May 1943), 247; O. M. Poe, Report, October 8, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. I, 169, 176; T. Doan, Report, March 28, 1865, *ibid.*, 562; J. C. Davis to R. P. Dechert, February 18, 1865, *ibid.*, Pt. II, 480.

⁵⁰J. C. Moore, Report, March 27, 1865, *ibid.*, Pt. I, 427.

serviceable bridge was finally ready by late afternoon on March 6.⁵¹

Gathering at the crossing points, well before the bridges were completed, were thousands of troops with their supply wagons, artillery trains, and draft animals as well as the refugees who had followed the army from Columbia with their vehicles and animals. Once begun, the crossing continued through the hours of daylight and darkness for three days at Cheraw and for a day and a half at Pegues Ferry. If the soldiers followed the method used at other crossings, they carried pine torches at night to light their way over the turbulent river. As troops reached the opposite bank, they marched a few miles beyond the stream and encamped to await the arrival of the rest of the army. The crossing was always hazardous and sometimes fatal. A soldier in an Illinois regiment lost his footing near the midpoint of the bridge at Cheraw and fell into the river. He struggled bravely, but the strength of the current and the weight of his knapsack and accoutrements pulled him beneath the surface. He drowned before a rescue boat could reach him.⁵²

At both crossings, confusion and congestion were problems, but at Pegues Ferry the condition of the bridge brought additional complications. During the period of the crossing, the churning Pee Dee repeatedly broke the structure, which necessitated tedious delays, sometimes of several hours, while the overworked pontoniers made repairs. Kilpatrick's cavalry and the Fourteenth Corps managed to cross at Pegues Ferry, but the Twentieth Corps marched to Cheraw where the bridge was more reliable.⁵³

The movement of troops across the Pee Dee at Cheraw was smoother but not without incident. Between the town and the river was a deep ravine that the columns of troops passed on the way to the pontoon bridge. Thrown into the ravine, to a depth of several feet, were tons of Confederate powder and shells. Soldiers, recklessly setting fire to cakes of powder near the ravine, unintentionally ignited the entire mass. A terrible explosion resulted.⁵⁴ Reported one observer: "For fifty rods around the ground was blackened, the trees begrimed and broken, and the hillside torn up, while

⁵¹Regimental Committee, *Ninety-second Illinois Volunteers* (Freeport, Ill.: Journal Steam Publishing House and Book Bindery, 1875), 223; W. C. Johnson, Journal, 49, Miscellaneous Manuscripts Collection, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress; H. W. Slocum to W. T. Sherman, March 6, 1865, ORA, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. II, 704; A. C. McClurg to G. P. Buell, March 6, 1865, *ibid.*, 705.

⁵²W. C. Johnson, Journal, 35-38; Jackson, *Diary*, 190.

⁵³J. C. Davis, Report, March 28, 1865, ORA, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. I, 432; W. C. Johnson, Journal, 49-50; A. S. Williams, Report, March 31, 1865, ORA, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. I, 584.

⁵⁴W. B. Woods to F. H. Wilson, March 6, 1865, *ibid.*, Pt. II, 701.

boxes of ammunition flew into fragments, the shell[s] ascended far in the air bursting at great distances from the scene of explosion."⁵⁵ Immediately after the blast, according to another observer, "The men and animals were all stupefied, then the animals stampeded, and it was with great difficulty they were quieted again."⁵⁶ Among the large number of soldiers waiting nearby to cross the river, several were wounded and a few were killed.⁵⁷

The explosion damaged and destroyed buildings in the town, causing injuries and generally terrifying civilians. Laura Inglis, member of a prominent family in Cheraw, said of the blast:

The deafening report and the shock of the explosion, shattering the window panes of about every house in the central part of town, struck terror to the hearts of the people in ignorance of the cause. Together with the fact that a few shells had already been thrown into the town, this gave rise to the report that a general bombardment would follow. This proved to be a false alarm, but in the meantime the streets were soon filled with hurrying groups of townspeople seeking shelter out of range of the shells.⁵⁸

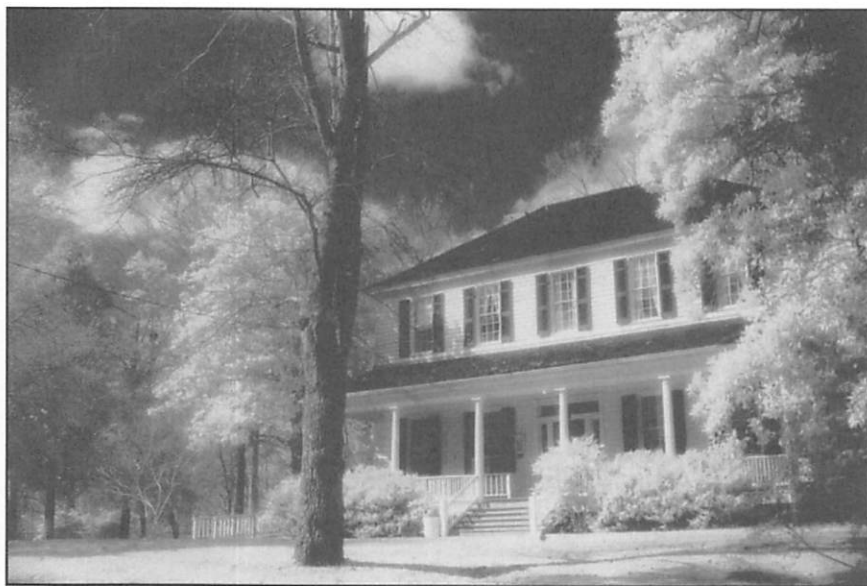
Cheraw remained under Federal occupation while the crossing of the Pee Dee continued. Sherman moved his headquarters to Cheraw the day following its capture and was pleasantly surprised at the extent of the town and with the quantity of seized materials. The original attraction of Cheraw for him was the bridge. He had not known that the town housed a vast quantity of supplies. Included in the captured inventory were twenty-five field pieces, sixteen limbers, sixteen caissons, 3,600 barrels of powder, 5,000 rounds of artillery ammunition, 20,000 rounds of infantry ammunition, 2,000 muskets, 1,000 cavalry sabers, a large amount of material for the manufacture of fixed ammunition, machine tools, one locomotive, twelve or fifteen freight cars, and thousands of bales of cotton. Also captured were commissary stores to fill supply wagons of the Right Wing. Soldiers spiked all of the cannon, except three Blakely guns which they took as trophies, and set fire to railroad facilities, to the warehouses of cotton, and to the military

⁵⁵Nichols, *Great March*, 203.

⁵⁶Osborn, *Trail*, 169.

⁵⁷F. J. Hurlbut, Report, April 7, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. I, 363-64; Burton, *Diary*, 67-68.

⁵⁸Laura Inglis, "A Reminiscence of Sherman's Raid," in *Recollections and Reminiscences* (n.p.: South Carolina Division, United Daughters of the Confederacy, 1990), IV, 305.



The Matheson House served as Sherman's headquarters during the occupation of Cheraw. This is a modern photograph of the structure. Courtesy of Dew James, Director of the Pee Dee Heritage Center.

stores they could not remove. Cheraw ranked with Columbia and Fayetteville as the most important supply depots taken during Sherman's march through the Carolinas.⁵⁹

Cheraw suffered during the four days of Union control. Federal officers gave orders against wanton destruction and pillaging, and the provost guard patrolled the streets. The pious General Howard even issued an order against cursing. Nevertheless, dislocation and destruction prevailed. Soldiers bivouacked in the streets and in virtually every open space while high ranking officers quartered themselves in homes.⁶⁰ Virginia Tarrh,

⁵⁹W. T. Sherman to H. W. Slocum, March 4, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. II, 681; W. T. Sherman to F. P. Blair, March 3, 1865, *ibid.*, 666; F. P. Blair, Report, April 1, 1865, *ibid.*, Pt. I, 381; W. T. Sherman to J. Kilpatrick, March 5, 1865, *ibid.*, Pt. II, 693; M. C. Garber, Report, July 10, 1865, *ibid.*, Vol. LIII, 54; Nichols, *Great March*, 199; Fenwick Y. Hedley, *Marching Through Georgia* (Chicago: M. A. Donahue and Company, 1884), 398; C. Cadle to M. F. Force, March 5, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. II, 690; O. M. Poe, Report, October 8, 1865, *ibid.*, Pt. I, 171; Osborn, *Trail*, 168; W. T. Sherman to E. M. Stanton, March 12, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. II, 793.

⁶⁰F. Mott, Special Field Orders, No. 2, March 5, 1865, *ibid.*, 689; F. J. Hurlbut, Report, April 7, 1865, *ibid.*, Pt. I, 363, 364; A. M. Van Dyke, General Field Orders, No. 12, March 5, 1865, *ibid.*, Pt. II, 686; Henrietta Buchanan, "Recollections," in *Recollections and Reminiscences*, IV, 398; Sherman, *Memoirs*, II, 291-92.

whose husband was in the Confederate Army, recorded the abhorrence she felt with Federal troops in and around her home: "The larger portion of our house, during those dreadful days, was occupied by a number of officers and men, and oftentimes the back yard swarmed with the rougher class of privates."⁶¹ To Mrs. C. E. Jarrott, who was just a girl at the time, it seemed that "the whole of Sherman's army" was in Cheraw "with banners flying, bands playing and hundreds of cheering soldiers."⁶² Foragers gathered supplies and plunder from homes in the town and the surrounding countryside.

Elizabeth Allston Pringle was a daughter in one of the families visited by foragers, and she later described the experience. The family was having dinner when the soldiers came upon the porch and loudly demanded: "'Whiskey! We want liquor! Don't lie; we know you have it! We want whiskey! We want firearms!'" After entering the house, the men "seemed delighted at the sight of the dinner-table, and for a time were occupied eating and pocketing all that could be pocketed." The intruders went into the storeroom where "they opened box after box." Other soldiers were upstairs where Elizabeth's "sister was having a trying time. She unlocked her trunk to prevent its being ripped open with a sword, and looked on while they ran through it, taking all her jewels and everything of value, holding up each garment for examination and asking its uses, each one being greeted by shouts of laughter." Not satisfied to search only the house, soldiers outside were "going all over the yard, running ramrods into the ground to find buried things."⁶³

Troops waiting in Cheraw for orders to cross the river found various ways to occupy their time. A Union officer noted in his diary, "I have been wandering through the town today, which is really pretty, with wide streets and avenues bordered with elm-trees, behind which, in the midst of beautiful gardens, are situated tastefully built homes."⁶⁴ Other soldiers found less constructive activities. They plundered the valuables sent to Cheraw from the low country, sacked businesses, and started fires. Fires set to destroy supplies and important buildings and fires set for no particular purpose burned the business district of the town. The blaze along the main street threatened to reach the makeshift hospitals housing the sick and injured soldiers left behind when Hardee abandoned the city, but troops of

⁶¹Virginia C. Tarrh, "Reminiscences," in Mrs. A. T. Smythe, Miss. M. B. Poppenheim, and Mrs. Thomas A. Taylor (eds.), *South Carolina Women in the Confederacy* (Columbia: The State Company, 1903), I, 194.

⁶²Mrs. C. E. Jarrott, "Reminiscences," in *Recollections and Reminiscences*, I, 502.

⁶³Elizabeth W. Allston Pringle, *Chronicles of Chicora Wood* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), 229, 230, 231, 232.

⁶⁴Nichols, *Great March*, 202.

the provost guard prevented the fire from reaching the hospitals. On March 4, General Mower fired captured Confederate cannon to mark the second inauguration of Abraham Lincoln, and individual soldiers ignited small quantities of powder in what one of them called a "Gunpowder Jollification." The soldiers helped themselves to stores of wine they discovered in the town and celebrated well into the night.⁶⁵

The last significant engagement of Sherman's troops on the right bank of the Pee Dee involved the mounted force sent from Cheraw to Florence. The raid was not a threat to the security of the military prison at Florence because the stockade there was already closed. The advance of Sherman's army from Savannah into South Carolina brought near panic among Confederate officials responsible for military prisons in South Carolina, and Lieutenant Colonel John F. Iverson, commandant of the Florence Stockade, received confusing and conflicting orders for removal of the prisoners from Florence. At first he was to send the prisoners by railroad to southwest Georgia, but Sherman's advance on Columbia cut the railroad well before Iverson could begin the transfer. He subsequently received orders to move the prisoners to Raleigh, but Lieutenant General Theophilus H. Holmes insisted that he did not have enough guards at Raleigh and recommended Greensborough as a suitable destination for the Union captives. The resolution of Iverson's quandary came from an unexpected quarter when in mid-February Lieutenant General U. S. Grant abruptly agreed to a resumption of the exchange of prisoners between North and South. In accordance with the terms of the cartel, the prisoners from Florence were paroled into Federal hands at Wilmington.⁶⁶

From the beginning of the campaign in the Carolinas, Sherman intended to ruin the vital railroad junction at Florence, and destruction of those railroad facilities was the purpose of the mounted strike from Cheraw. Colonel Ruben Williams of the Twelfth Indiana Infantry led two regiments of mounted infantry and a detachment of mounted foragers on the raid.

⁶⁵F. J. Hurlbut, Report, April 7, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. I, 363, 364; Burton, *Diary*, 67; Jackson, *Diary*, 190; Osborn, *Trail*, 167, 168; A. M. Van Dyke, Circular, March 4, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. II, 677; J. E. Burton, Report, *ibid.*, Pt. I, 815; Charles W. Wills, *Army Life of an Illinois Soldier* (Washington: Globe Printing Co., 1906), 357; Andrew J. Boies, *Record of the Thirty-third Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry* (Fitchburg: Sentinel, Printing Co., 1880), 113.

⁶⁶H. Forno to Assistant Adjutant-General, March 10, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. II, Vol. VIII, 451-54; J. L. Smith to S. Cooper, March 31, 1865, *ibid.*, 450; J. E. Mulford to R. Ould, February 16, 1865, *ibid.*, 238; S. Cooper to Comdt. of Prisons at Florence, Charlotte, and Salisbury, February 16, 1865, *ibid.*, 238; W. H. Hatch to J. M. Schofield, February 23, 1865, *ibid.*, 296-97; J. M. Schofield to R. F. Hoke, February 23, 1865, *ibid.*, 297; J. M. Schofield to U. S. Grant, February 28, 1865, *ibid.*, 317.

Brigadier General Beverly H. Robertson was in Florence with a brigade of Confederate cavalry reinforced with artillery. Originally part of Hardee's command, Robertson was in the town to interfere with any Union effort to reach Sherman from the seacoast by way of the river or the railroad. The raiders from Cheraw neared Florence on March 5, and skirmishing began on the outskirts of town. The Federals fought their way to the railroad depot but were unable to burn it before being forced to withdraw. Confederate cavalymen, principally from Tennessee and South Carolina regiments, drove the invaders from the town and at least ten miles beyond. The raiders returned to Cheraw and crossed the Pee Dee on the pontoon bridge.⁶⁷

The successful defense of Florence was one of the few instances in South Carolina when Confederates prevented Sherman's troops from attaining their objective. Robertson saved Florence from the torch, but his victory was otherwise hollow. Williams's troops destroyed the railroad above Florence, and the railroad bridge over the Pee Dee at Mars Bluff was apparently broken by a party of Confederates sent from Fayetteville under orders from General Braxton Bragg to destroy all railroad bridges over streams from the Lumber River south to the Pee Dee. Stranded on the right bank, Robertson's brigade slowly marched upriver, finally crossing at various points well above Cheraw. Robertson was unable to reestablish communications with the main body of the Confederate army in North Carolina until mid-March.⁶⁸

The final day of the Federal crossing over the Pee Dee was March 7. A party of foragers from the Twentieth Corps was the last to cross at Cheraw, and pontoniers raised that bridge by midday. At Pegues Ferry, the crossing of the Fourteenth Corps continued throughout the day and into the night. Engineers of the Fifty-eighth Indiana Infantry worked through the darkness until early morning on March 8 before lifting their bridge. With the recovery of the bridges, the entire Federal army was once again on the march for Fayetteville.⁶⁹

If soldiers guarding the rear of the Right Wing troubled themselves to look back across the river, they saw smoke still rising above Cheraw.⁷⁰ The

⁶⁷W. T. Sherman to J. G. Foster, January 19, 1865, *ibid.*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. II, 96; Osborn, *Trail*, 81; J. A. Logan, Report, March 31, 1865, *ORA*, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. I, 230; R. Williams, Report, March 6, 1865, *ibid.*, 255; B. H. Robertson to J. E. Johnston, March 17, 1865, *ibid.*, Pt. II, 1421; G. T. Beauregard to W. Hampton, *ibid.*, 1300-01.

⁶⁸R. Williams, Report, March 6, 1865, *ibid.*, Pt. I, 255; A. Anderson to F. L. Childs, February 28, 1865, *ibid.*, Pt. II, 1294-95; O. O. Howard to W. T. Sherman, March 7, 1865, *ibid.*, 713; B. H. Robertson to J. E. Johnston, March 17, 1865, *ibid.*, 1421.

⁶⁹F. J. Hurlbut, Report, April 7, 1865, *ibid.*, Pt. I, 364; J. D. Morgan, to A. C. McClurg, March 7, 1865, *ibid.*, Pt. II, 719; T. Jones, Report, March 29, 1865, *ibid.*, Pt. I, 521; J. Moore, Report, March 27, 1865, *ibid.*, 427.

⁷⁰E. S. Johnson, Report, March 28, 1865, *ibid.*, 368.

town had paid a heavy toll because of its location at an important crossing on the Pee Dee River. The presence of Hardee's troops, the fighting through the streets, and the Federal occupation were remarkably destructive. Fire had consumed much of the town. The wooden bridge across the river was gone. The railroad along the left bank was hopelessly disrupted. And residents had lost much valuable property.

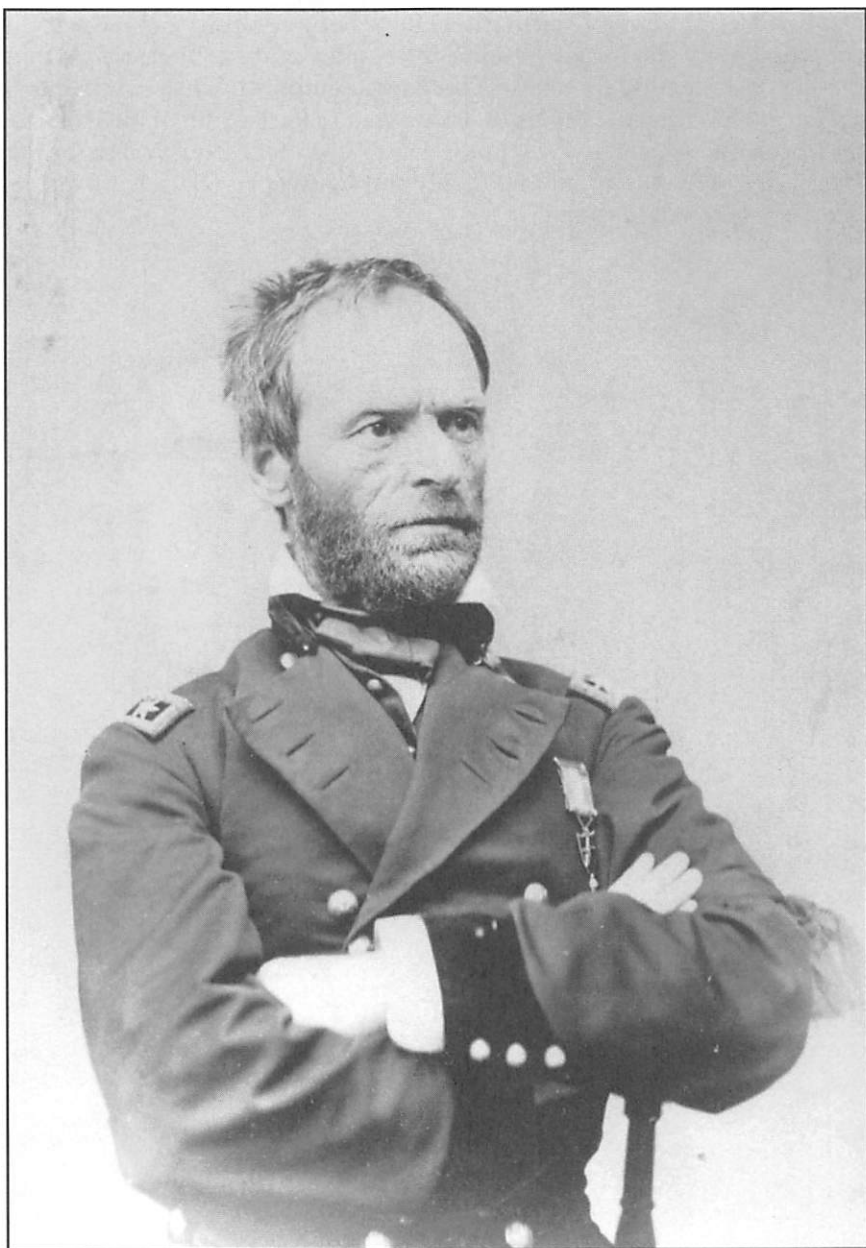
As the Northern juggernaut moved away from the river, Sherman was satisfied. Hardee had escaped, but he had not tarried on the left bank to oppose the Federal crossing. Union troops captured substantial quantities of arms and ammunition and tons of supplies badly needed by the Confederacy. The Federal army moved over the Pee Dee with some difficulty but without major delay. Transportation routes for miles around Cheraw were broken. These accomplishments came with a minimum of casualties among Union soldiers. In retrospect, Sherman considered the capture of Cheraw one of the principal achievements of the campaign in the Carolinas.⁷¹

All that remained on the river of military significance was the gunboat that had returned to Mars Bluff. Lieutenant Johnston and his officers recognized that an effort to reach open ocean through the now occupied mouth of the Pee Dee River was futile. By the same token, they did not want the vessel simply to fall into enemy hands. They decided to destroy the ship. In mid-March, they sailed into a deep portion of the river just below the navy yard and scuttled their gunboat. The C.S.S. *Pedee*, apparently having never fired a shot at the enemy, settled into the mud at the bottom of the river, and the sailors set out to reach Confederate lines in North Carolina.⁷²

Leaving wreckage and desolation behind, the war moved away from the Pee Dee region with Sherman's troops as they advanced into North Carolina. For most of the conflict, the river and adjacent seacoast lacked strategic significance and played only a minor role. The lightly defended seaboard at Georgetown was only occasionally troubled as blockade runners and blockading vessels competed on the nearby sea. The vulnerability of the seacoast at the mouth of the Pee Dee River led to establishment of a navy yard and construction of the gunboat at Mars Bluff. At nearby Florence, Confederate authorities established a prisoner of war stockade where thousands of Federal soldiers languished. The war finally came to the Pee

⁷¹J. Moore, Report, April 9, 1865, *ibid.*, 188; W. T. Sherman to E. M. Stanton, March 12, 1865, *ibid.*, Pt. II, 793.

⁷²Clayton, *Narrative*, 106; W. M. Hunter to S. S. Lee, March 25, 1865, ORN, Ser. I, Vol. XVI, 511. When abnormally low water in the Pee Dee River during the fall of 1925 and again in the fall of 1954 revealed the wreck, souvenir hunters and would be salvagers pulled the ship to pieces. See, *Florence Morning News Review*, September 15, 1925; *Columbia Record*, November 1, 1954.



Major General William Tecumseh Sherman (1820-1891) shortly after the war. Cheraw was Sherman's final stop before leaving South Carolina. Illustration courtesy of the Massachusetts Commandery, Military Order of the Loyal Legion and the US Army Military History Institute.

Dee basin with Sherman's army: the Federal navy occupied the seacoast; the river became a significant obstacle for Hardee and for Sherman as they disputed the crossing at Cheraw; Confederate authorities closed the military prison at Florence; and the C.S.S. *Pedee* went to the bottom of the river not far from the yard where it was built. The drama of the Civil War in the Pee Dee region of South Carolina suddenly and swiftly played itself out during February and March of 1865.