

# Sherman took toll on plantation

■ Union soldiers commandeered Rocky Mount on his way to destroy several towns. And Chester's repair depot was an important target.

Following the burning of Columbia in February 1865, Union Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman sent his army northward as a part of a plan to crush the remnants of the Confederate Army then fleeing Virginia.

Among Sherman's goals was destruction of all the major railroads and towns.

In the army's projected path were the towns of Chester, Rock Hill, York, Fort Mill and Charlotte. Chester, a major target, as the junction of three railroads and also had a repair depot. However, heavy rains sent so much water down the Catawba River and its tributaries that Sherman's plans had to be changed.

While waiting for the high waters to subside so that the army could cross, Sherman stayed at a plantation named Rocky Mount that was situated in the northwestern corner of Fairfield County. Rocky Mount was not far from Great Falls and was the spot that, early in the century, had nearly been selected as the site for a national military academy, rather than the present site at West Point, N.Y.

Sherman commandeered Rocky



Nearby  
history

LOUISE  
PETTUS

Mount as temporary headquarters for his senior staff. The two and a half-story house with white columns had been built in 1830 by James Barkley, a wealthy plantation owner. The home's brick were brought from England for the original purpose of building the military academy. When the plan failed, Barkley purchased the brick.

James Barkley's widow, Sarah, and her two daughters, Sarah and Mrs. Clara Johnston, and James Barkley Johnston, age 8, were the occupants of the house. For days, responding to rumors of the Union Army presence, the Barkley-Johnston household had been busy hiding their valuables. Hams and cured salt meat were hidden between the weather boarding and the ceiling of the garret. The flat

silver was sewn in large pockets on the inside of the ladies' garments.

The flatware and the meat, in spite of its obvious smell, were not discovered by the Union troops but everything else of value was plundered by the first wave of soldiers.

The fence around the yard and a store house were set afire. Next, the gin house and cotton seed were set and soon the barns and stables were ablaze.

Sherman camped near the plantation house for eight days waiting for the waters of the Catawba to recede. In 1938, in an interview with Bob Ward, a newspaper columnist from Rock Hill, James Barkley Johnston recalled the events he witnessed as a child.

Johnston described Sherman as tall, handsome, clean-shaved with reddish hair — altogether "striking." Every evening Sherman went into the house and talked with the women.

The women invited the Union officers to breakfast with them the first morning. All they had to offer was rye-coffee, meat and bread, but they shared it. In repayment the officers ordered the soldiers to

not slash their oil paintings or break up the furniture as they wished to do. The officers also stopped the soldiers from tearing out flooring they wanted to use in building a pontoon bridge across the river.

Undoubtedly the Union troops would have burned the house as they departed if a detachment of Gen. Joe Wheeler's Confederate cavalry hadn't arrived. The Union troops, thinking it was Wheeler's whole army, cleared out following a brief skirmish.

There was little left of the once fine plantation when the Union soldiers departed. James Barkley Johnston recalled that they left behind an old crippled horse. He named the horse "Billy Sherman" and plowed the first crop with it after the Civil War.

The family gathered up the scattered corn from where the Union soldiers had fed their horses, washed it and then ground it at an abandoned mill. The cornmeal and the meat in the attic kept them alive.

Johnston, living in the Great Depression year of 1938, observed: "The present generation know nothing of such a depression as there was then."