

# MI - General Background

1992

Columbia, 1860-1865

Source: Columbia, South Carolina, History of a City  
by John A. Montgomery  
Greater Columbia Chamber of Commerce, 1979

The War Between the States was begun by a secession meeting held in the First Baptist Church in Columbia on December 17, 1860. Due to a case of smallpox located in a home directly across the street, the meeting was moved to Charleston. On January 6, 1861, the Cadet Corps from the Citadel (Military College of South Carolina) fired on the ship that was sent to reinforce Fort Sumter in the Charleston harbor. Two other forts had been abandoned by US troops to fully staff Fort Sumter. The ship was to resupply both foodstuffs and ammunition. There were no fatalities in the battle, although a Union soldier was killed when a gun exploded prematurely during a flag ceremony at the Fort.

The population in Columbia swelled from 8,000 to 20,000 due to people leaving Charleston. Valuables from all over the state where they were deemed more vulnerable to attack were stored in Columbia. The city was supportive of the war effort, opening the largest hospital in the Confederacy in Columbia. The CSA's greatest source of medicine was a government lab at the present fairgrounds site. There were two mints here for Confederate money. The city supplied and manufactured everything from cannon balls and bullets to tents and buttons.

In January, 1865, just weeks before final disaster, the city was festive with a "Great Bazaar", a wartime carnival with exhibits from all states of the Confederacy represented. The event raised \$350,000 for the Confederacy.

The following diary format is quoted directly from the book, pages 50-60. (The abbreviations and shortcuts are mine--sg)

Columbians expected to live out the war without being exposed to combat. They were not especially apprehensive when Gen. Sherman started his march through S C from Savannah. The general belief was that he would strike against Charleston, where evacuation plans were already made. Not until Monday, Feb. 13, 1865, when Sherman's army with its 60,000 troops and its 2,500 wagons left Orangeburg in partial ruins, crossed the North Edisto River, and turned north, did Columbia become convinced that it was a target. That night Sherman and his Fifteenth Corps camped 21 miles south of the city.

The city reacted with confusion and fright to the news of Sherman's advance. Roads out of town were choked with fleeing, terrified refugees. Trains were jammed. Baggage was lost. Here are the day-by-day events of the next, terrible week.

Tuesday, February 14, 1865. Sherman's 15th Corps reached Congaree Creek, a Congaree River tributary 7 miles below Columbia.

Gen. Beauregard, commander of Confederate troops in the Columbia area, ordered Maj. Allen J. Green, post commander, ~~to remove cotton from the warehouses.~~ It was placed temporarily on Main Street. Beauregard went to Charleston a roundabout way by train--the direct line had been cut--to persuade Lt. Gen Wm. J. Hardee, commander of Charleston's 13,000-man garrison, to evacuate the seaside city and assist in defense of Columbia. Hardee agreed, but Sherman's drive was too swift and the help too late. Beauregard started back to Columbia that night by way of Florence and Sumter.

*beginning of  
a mistake*

Wednesday, Feb. 15. Sherman camped in a new but abandoned Confederate fort he found on the north side of Congaree Creek. His advance units moved into positions across the Congaree River from Columbia.

Beauregard arrived back in Columbia from Charleston in the afternoon. Confederate troops, retreating from the sites of the present towns of Cayce and W Columbia, burned the Congaree Bridge behind them.

Thursday, Feb. 16. At 9 am, Sherman's artillery fired across the Congaree into Columbia. After an hour's pause the bombardment was resumed and continued throughout the afternoon for a total of 325 rounds. One shell crashed into the old wooden State House. Others struck granite walls of the unfinished new capitol. The scars are still there, marked by bronze stars. Other targets included the railway depot on Gervais St. (to prevent looters from carrying away sacks of corn and meal the federal troops wanted), the armory, and workshops. Two persons were killed. A shell fragment struck Gen. Beauregard's headquarters at Hunt's Hotel.

Panic reigned. Despite martial law, rioters and thieves ran rampant in Columbia. Plunderers of both sexes and races accidentally set off an explosion that killed thirty-five persons at ~~the~~ S C Railway depot on lower Gervais St and destroyed the building. Confederate commissary and quartermaster stores were thrown open to all takes after soldiers grabbed what they could. There was a mad scramble of refugees. Breakdown in transportation was so complete that a wagon could not be hired for \$500.

Night brought on frenzied activity. Gen. Wade Hampton, relieved of his duties in Va. to help his native state, took command of the Confederate cavalry. Hurrried councils of war were held but options were few. The 5-mile cavalcade of Sherman's army outmanned the scattered units of Confederate troops in and around Columbia, 10 to 1. The only way to save the city from destruction was to surrender it before the battle was joined. Confed. Gen. Joseph Wheeler's troops had already started digging rifle pits for defense. Some of

the soldiers deserted and joined black and white civilians in plundering the city.

*Cotton* ⇒ Gen. Hampton ordered the removal of stores of cotton to open fields for safe burning. But the bales were piled on Main street and wagons were not available to move them.

Late Thursday night, Gov. A G McGrath and a large group of Confed. and state officials boarded a train and left the city, competing with a mob of civilians who were also trying to get out of Sherman's range.

On this same day, across the Congaree River from Columbia, Sherman issued order No. 26 for the occupation of the S C capital. He instructed Gen. Howard, commander of the army's right wing, to destroy public buildings, railroad property, factories, and machine shops, but to spare libraries, asylums, and private dwellings. The left wing under Gen Slocum was leaving Lexington and had orders to bypass Columbia, cross the Broad River at Alston, and head for Winnsboro.

Sherman's 15th Corps streamed up the Congaree, crossed the Saluda River at the Saluda factory, the present scene of the Riverbanks Zoo, and camped on the peninsula between the Saluda and Broad rivers. Some of the contingents did not arrive at the bivouac until late in the night.

The 17th Corps stopped on the Congaree River bank facing Columbia.

Sherman spent the night at "Camp Sorghum" (nicknamed for its diet of molasses) in what is now the Saluda Gardens residential suburb of W. Columbia. Established in 1864, the camp accommodated about 1400 captured federal officers who were transferred to Columbia when Charleston was bombarded. They were freed by Sherman. (Columbia's other prison camp was the state asylum.)

Col G A Stone of the 3rd Brigade of Maj. Gen. Woods' 1st Division forced a crossing on pontoon rafts to the Columbia side of the Broad River where the bridge had been burned. After firing artillery shells over the river into the woods, a federal force was deployed on the east bank to cover the building of a pontoon bridge the next morning.

Friday, Feb. 17. Early in the morning, Gen. Sherman rode to the head of the 15th Corps, sat on a log on the bank with Gen. Howard, and watched until the pontoon bridge being built across the Broad River under the command of Col. Stone was finished. Meanwhile, Gen. Hampton advised Columbia's Mayor T J Goodwyn to surrender the city. Under previous orders of Gen. Beauregard, evacuation of all remaining soldiers in the city began.

*Cotton* ⇒ Hampton called the mayor's attention early Friday morning to the cotton on Main Street and suggested that he post a guard to prevent fire.

At 9:30 am Sherman received a message from Col Stone that the mayor of Columbia was coming to surrender the city. Sherman also received a note from the mother superior of Ursuline Convent in Columbia. She wrote that she formerly

taught at an Ohio school where the general's daughter, Minnie, was a student, and asked for special protection for the convent. Sherman handed the note to his brother-in-law, Co. Ewing, inspector general, and told him to assure the lady that "we contemplate no destruction of any private property in Columbia". Sherman sent orders to Col. Stone to go to the Columbia side of the river where he would join him.

Goodwyn had approached the river on Broad River road accompanied by (several politicians). They rode in a carriage that bore a white flag.

At 10 am, Gen. Beauregard and his staff rode northward out of the city.

At 11 am, Gen. Sherman (& officers) crossed the Broad River and entered the city of Columbia, preceded by Colonel Stone, who boarded the mayor's carriage to discuss surrender plans.

All other Confederate officers had evacuated the city, but General Hampton lingered at Main Street and Elmwood Ave while Sherman's federal army trooped closer on Broad River Road. Accompanied by a small cluster of enlisted cavalymen, the general sat erectly in the saddle on one of his fine horses watching until the federal soldiers made the turn into the extension of Main St. He saw Mayor Goodwyn and his surrender party come into view. They were riding in a carriage flanked by columns of soldiers in blue and still bearing the white flag of capitulations.

Hampton's beloved city, at his own command, had fallen to spare it from the blood and destruction of a hopeless battle. With a feeling of sadness, but with the false assurance that the capital's safety was secure, he turned his horse eastward and, with head held high, rode slowly out of the city.

It was not quite noon when the federal military procession paraded south on Columbia's principal thoroughfare. Sherman was escorted to the Duncan Blanton home on Senate St, which had been reserved for him. Only one Confederate gun fired during the Columbia submission, and that was contrary to orders.

Yankee soldiers were camped around the outskirts of Columbia, but they sauntered into the center of the city singly and in groups. Some citizens shared their whisky with them. Before many hours had passed stores of liquors were being broken into and kegs were opened in the streets. Soldiers and civilians greedily dipped into the barrels with canteens, cups, and buckets. Some citizens complained that they were robbed and their houses plundered by drunk and disorderly soldiers, but there was not a single report of rape. This was no doubt due to two factors. Military regulations provided quick and certain death for soldiers convicted of rape. And the horde of camp followers that trailed Sherman's army, estimated by one source as high as 20,000 (equal to the pre-evacuation population of Columbia),

must have been a mitigating influence against criminal sexual behavior.

During the occupation of Columbia by Union troops, Gen. Hampton's beautiful boyhood home, Millwood, as well as the residence of George Trenholm (Confederate Treas.)....were destroyed.

At sundown fires began breaking out over the city. Cotton from bales whose bands had been broken blew like a snowstorm, flecking trees and shrubbery with lint. A strong wind was whipping a dust storm out of the northwest. The spread of downtown flames from building to building was like a prairie fire. By this time, with every tenth person drunk, drinking in the streets had turned into an orgy. Men, women, and children, black and white, soldier and civilian, rushed frantically and aimlessly through the streets "shouting and yelling like mad people". During the early evening, as one observer said, buildings were "swallowed up in an awful holocaust". As another commented, "Business blocks, churches, dwellings, old colonial mansions, and the old capitol buildings were swept away by the mighty and devouring element."

Although Columbians who endured the 5-hr fire generally blamed the catastrophe on the enemy, they also reported acts of chivalrous kindness by some occupying troops. Some guards risked their personal safety to repel marauders. Sherman protected individuals in his immediate vicinity and afterward gave supplies to some of his old friends from Charleston, where he was stationed for 4 yrs before the war. Late on the night of the 17th, after most of the city was destroyed and flames were dying down, Sherman and other officers made personal excursions to quell disorder and rioting, and order was restored. In the roundup and expulsion of lawless soldiers 370 were arrested, two killed, and thirty wounded.

Ursuline Convent at the corner of Main and Blanding streets was destroyed along with the buildings that surrounded it. The nuns and their pupils escaped to St. Peter's Cemetery where they huddled by the tombstones against the heat of the flames and the cold of the winter night.

Saturday, Feb 18. When the sun came up, the main part of Columbia was in ashes. The landscape was a broad expanse of charred remains and a wilderness of chimneys. Eighty-four of the 124 blocks in the 366-acre heart of the city had hardly a building left. Estimates of the number of buildings destroyed range from a contemporary count of 1425 to a recent figure of 458.

Sherman and Hampton charged each other with being responsible for the burning of Columbia. Enough books and reports assigning blame for the conflagration have been written to fill a large library. After well over a century the debate continues.

*Cotton in trees spread fires w/winds*

Sherman's troops devoted the day to destroying military objectives that were missed by the fire. These included foundries and the city's gas works.

The mother superior of Ursuline Convent made her second appeal to Sherman, this time for protection for the homeless nuns and young girls of her institution. He said they could stay in any house they wanted. She selected John S. Preston's home which was then occupied by Gen Logan and is now preserved as the Hampton-Preston home. When Logan moved out, the Ursuline group moved in, they found the rooms in shambles.

Sunday, Feb 19. The state arsenal was being destroyed by federal troops in the afternoon when an explosion killed an officer and three enlisted men. 20 soldiers were wounded, one of them mortally.

Another terrific explosion occurred while Union soldiers were dumping Confederate ammunition into the river. Sherman reported that sixteen men were killed and several wagons and mule teams were destroyed.

Monday, Feb 20. (Sherman Left.)

A month and a half was to pass before Gen Robert E Lee's surrender at Appomattox, but for Columbians--homeless, hungry, and isolated from neighboring cities by the severed railroad lines--the war was over.