

**“For the First Time I Am Ashamed”: Rattled Yankees
and Inconsolable Civilians in the Wake of the Burning of Columbia**

Text of an Address by Dr. Eric W. Plaag,
at the South Carolina Confederate Relic Room, Columbia, SC,
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When the 4th Minnesota Infantry finally arrived in Beaufort from Savannah by transport in late January 1865, they fully expected to see more of what they’d already experienced with the rest of Sherman’s 15th Army Corps in Georgia. Burning towns were nothing new to them, as they had passed through Marietta and Atlanta, where both civilian and government property had been burned with abandon. In spite of hearing Sherman’s order on November 24, 1864, that any soldier caught stealing, pillaging, or burning occupied houses would be shot, the activity had continued almost immediately, first with the burning alive of two men in a cotton gin on November 29, then at numerous homes along the way to Miller’s Station outside Savannah, where more personal property was destroyed. Members of the 4th Minnesota fully expected that Savannah would burn, too, but were surprised when it was surrendered without much of a fight.

Once in South Carolina, the 4th Minnesota saw its share of small towns burned or dismantled for wood used in bridge repair. McPhersonville was the first, a small hamlet consumed by intentional fire on February 1. Then came Buford’s Bridge on

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February 5, the entirety of which—aside from a small church—was demolished for bridge lumber. For most of the way to Orangeburg, private homes and commercial and public infrastructure received the torch. Few in the 4th Minnesota found this offensive, perhaps because many of these towns and private homes were empty, their residents having fled to perceived safety elsewhere, often in Columbia. Even the fire at Orangeburg on February 12, which destroyed about half the city, left little impression on the diarists of the 4th Minnesota, many of whom failed to mention it, perhaps because the prevailing story among other regiments was that a local Jewish merchant had intentionally set the fire, rather than Union men. Columbia, though—Columbia would be different.

One thing I will not do in this presentation is assess blame for the start of the fire that destroyed the city. Volume upon volume has been written trying to resolve this question, so our sojourn of merely an hour or so here today will not allow us to tackle that mystery. What is certain is that there was strong sentiment among many of the Union troops that Columbia, as the capital city of the birthplace of secession, should be destroyed. Indeed, even as he prepared to cross the pontoons at the Broad River Bridge on the morning of February 17, General Logan was overheard by his own troops as saying to General Howard, "I will now move into this hell of treason. But say the word and I will sweep this city from the earth." What is certain is that a fire broke out on the afternoon of February 17; its exact cause will probably never be known, and it does not matter anyway. What DOES matter is what occurred in

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response to the fire. What DOES matter is the behavior of Sherman's commanding officers and the thousands of his men who occupied the city that night.

There is general agreement about many events leading up to the fire. After driving off Confederates from their defenses along Congaree Creek on February 15, Sherman's right wing moved through modern Cayce and West Columbia, burning the Saluda Factory near the present-day Riverbanks Zoo and crossing the Saluda River by pontoon by the morning of February 16. During the day on February 16, Sherman allowed his artillery commander to release an uncertain number of shells on the city, firing from multiple locations along the west bank of the Congaree, including a location probably near the Guignard Brickworks. Most of these shells, some Union accounts—including Sherman's—insisted, were directed at the State House and account for the bronze stars found there today on the west and south facades, denoting the impacts of those shells. But Sherman's own Chief of Artillery, Thomas Ward Osborn, admitted that the shelling was far more substantial, saying, "We amused ourselves in shelling the town and seeing the people scatter about the streets." Columbia residents, including the fairly reliable Emma LeConte, who lived near the South Carolina College campus at the corner of Sumter and Pendleton, described a much longer period of shelling that lasted from mid-morning into the late afternoon, with a brief respite of an hour or two around midday. As the preparations continued for the entry into Columbia, many of Sherman's men knew what was to follow. Henry Wright of the 6th Iowa told his parents a month after the fire, "In the morning we moved forward and found the rebs had all retreated to the

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north side of the Congaree. I went down to the bank and fired across at the houses on the bank. General Logan told us to pitch in and fire all we wanted to and draw their fire and if they fired one shot from their batteries he would burn the city. But they did not fire on us and he said we would burn it anyhow.”

Sometime during the day on February 14, as Sherman’s right wing moved on the defenses at Congaree Creek, Confederate officers had ordered that all cotton—both military and privately-owned—should be brought out of the warehouses and stores, removed from town, and burned. An order to this effect appeared in the newspaper on February 15. Unfortunately, because of the chaos surrounding the efforts of residents and refugees to evacuate to the north using the Charlotte Depot near present-day Benedict College on the northeast side of town, few means of transportation remained to remove the cotton from the city limits. Instead, it was placed on the streets in loose, ill-tied bales during the day on February 15 and 16. There is some confusion about whether any order was ever given by Confederate authorities to burn the cotton accumulated in several large piles around town, but at 7:00am on the morning of February 17, Confederate Lieutenant General Wade Hampton issued explicit orders that the cotton was not to be burned because of the high winds. Nevertheless, by mid-morning, much of the cotton had escaped from its bales, blew about the streets, and hung in the trees, giving the appearance to many observers, both northern and southern, of snow.

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Nearly simultaneously, matters took an auspicious turn sometime around dawn—some sources say 6:00am, others 7:00am—when a large group of Confederate stragglers, escaped slaves, and roustabouts tried to seize the abundant supplies left behind by Confederates in the Charleston Depot in the heart of the Vista—the rebuilt building that today houses Wet Willie’s—adjacent to where the now-evacuated Wayside Hospital had once operated. Entering the building with torches, one of the looters unintentionally ignited a load of gunpowder, causing an enormous explosion that all but demolished the building and killed perhaps three dozen looters, according to William Gilmore Simms, whose lengthy newspaper accounts in March 1865 documented the damage and events surrounding the fire.

About this same time, Union forces were beginning to pontoon their way across the Broad River just above the Broad River Bridge, which had been burned by Confederates the night before, then started to make their way into the city along River Road. Simultaneously, the last of Wheeler’s Confederate forces were hurrying out of the city along present-day Bull Street and the road to Charlotte, hoping to avoid a confrontation. As Confederate Major General MC Butler’s troops raced to the north to catch up via the east side of town, he carried out the firing of the Charlotte Depot, cutting off the ability of the federal troops to use the railroad to pursue the retreating Confederates. Meanwhile, a group of intrepid soldiers from the 17th Army Corps, just opposite Columbia at the burned out Gervais Street bridge, procured a flatboat and made a landing on the east bank of the Congaree, then tried to race up Columbia’s streets to beat the 15th Army Corps to the State House before being

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delayed and turned back by Confederate stragglers. Shortly thereafter, someone or something—perhaps vandals, perhaps a careless individual, perhaps a piece of Union artillery, which still occasionally rained on the city, perhaps even one of the first arriving Union troops—ignited several of the piles of cotton on Main Street, creating several small fires in the main business district.

Just before 11:00am, at a point near the intersection of Beaufort Street and River Road, Mayor Goodwyn met the advancing Union troops and surrendered the city to Colonel Stone, commanding the Third Brigade, First Division, of the 15th Army Corps, which was comprised entirely of Iowa men renowned for their viciousness toward civilians. Most accounts agree that assurances were made that private property in the city would not be harmed, and that the only buildings to be burned were those serving the military purposes or institutions of the Confederacy, provided that safe passage was guaranteed to the troops. It was an assurance that would be made repeatedly over the next six hours by Union officers including Sherman himself. Just moments later, a Confederate rear guard opened fire on Stone's men, prompting a threat that Goodwyn and his aides would be executed on the spot if any Union soldier was harmed. Fortunately, the Confederates withdrew after this sharp volley and joined their fleeing compatriots to the northeast.

Thereafter, Union troops streamed into the city, greeted by deliriously happy black residents, free and slave alike, and encouraged by many shopkeepers to take what they wished. Most store inventories had already been broken into that morning, as

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residents and slaves alike tried to secure food and supplies for themselves before Sherman's men arrived. As Sherman and his command entered, many, including Theodore Upson, noticed the burning bales of cotton that had just been extinguished by residents and local firemen working two hand-pumped fire engines. Meanwhile, hundreds of gallons of liquor and wine were brought onto the streets and given away freely, a point that is verified by nearly all of the eyewitnesses to the carnage that would follow. While this bacchanalia proceeded, Colonel Stone was busy at the old State House, placing the Union flag upon its mast and celebrating with his Iowa troops. By the time Colonel Stone returned downtown, most of his men were drunk, their inebriation aided by lack of sleep and food for the past two days. By 3:00pm, as William White of the 90th Illinois described it, "There were a few citizens, a great many negroes, and soldiers everywhere, many half drunk, and even some of the guard stationed to keep order were far from being sober. Even some of the 90th were getting funny while yet marching along the streets." Henry Wright of the 6th Iowa told a similar story to his parents: "The soldiers and citizens, negroes and everybody got drunk. It was the awfulest time I ever seen. Our regiment was detailed for picket. I was ordered to furnish 15 men and could only find 3. As soon as the pickets were sent out, I split for town."

By early afternoon, the prisoners at both the Columbia Jail at Washington and Assembly Street and Camp Asylum, the Confederate prison camp at the South Carolina Asylum on Bull Street, were released. Among these freed prisoners, many Union and Confederate accounts agree, was a prevailing desire to set the town on

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fire, and sure enough, by just after noon the old town jail was on fire from within, then promptly extinguished. It flared up again about 1:30pm, according to Simms, then was again put out, despite efforts by some of the occupying force to either obstruct the firemen or destroy their hoses. Samuel H. M. Byers, himself a prisoner who had once been held at the jail and who had escaped Camp Asylum just prior to the arrival of Sherman's men, held nothing back in placing some of the blame for what followed with his fellow prisoners: "Numbers of the Federal prisoners, who only a few weeks before had been marched through the streets like felons, had escaped, and what average human nature led them to do never will be known."

Expressing his concerns personally to General Sherman about the drunk men and a situation that seemed to be rapidly getting out of hand, Mayor Goodwyn asked what was to become of the town. Sherman again reassured him that the town would be as safe in Sherman's hands as it would in Goodwyn's own, allowing only that some government buildings would have to be destroyed the next day once the wind had died down. Indeed, Sherman made many assurances that afternoon, none more famous than his promise to Sister Baptista Lynch of the Ursuline Convent, who had once taught Sherman's own daughter in Ohio, that the young women in Sister Baptista's charge would be safe so long as they remained at the convent. Sherman then assigned several guards, none of them Catholic, for their protection.

What happened next is a matter of dispute, but by late afternoon, the piles of cotton were again on fire, wind-whipped into a frenzy that caused the fire to spread to other buildings. Accounts vary as to the direction of the wind—John Hill Ferguson of

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the 10th Illinois and Columbia resident Mrs. J. J. Pringle Smith both said it came from the northwest, for example, while William Gilmore Simms and others said it was a southwesterly wind—but all agree that it was intense and a major factor in spreading the flames. Meanwhile, the torch was set directly to other buildings, including the old Columbia jail again. The nearby Nickerson Hotel also caught fire, driving out the dozens of Union officers who had already claimed lodgings for themselves there. Far away from this action on Main Street, meanwhile, marauding troops began to set fire to private residences on the outskirts of downtown, so that by dark, as Simms described it, “There were then some twenty fires in full blast, in as many different quarters, at nearly the same moment; and while the alarm sounded from these quarters, a similar alarm was sent up almost simultaneously from Cotton Town, the northernmost limit of the city, and from Main Street in its very center.” Accounts are nearly unanimous in describing these incendiaries as carrying buckets of turpentine or other flammable liquids, dowsing raw cotton in the liquid, setting the cotton balls on fire, and throwing them into homes and stores.

Whatever the cause of the initial fire, by nightfall outright arson by Union troops was the principal cause of the spread of the fire to other parts of the city. Emma LeConte witnessed soldiers moving from house to house near her own home, driving residents out, entering homes, pouring turpentine onto beds, and setting them aflame. Residents who attempted to flee their burning homes with supplies, food, and blankets were stopped by drunken Union soldiers, who seized their goods and threw them back into the flames. Simms recounted dozens of stories of

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Columbia's old men being hoodwinked or simply strongarmed into turning over their watches as they fled their homes or sought safety elsewhere. These tales were verified by other witnesses, such as Charles D. Bateman, an immigrant from Cork, Ireland, who was robbed of his valuables in his own home, and Union soldier Samuel H. M. Byers, who saw his fellow men seize and break into women's trunks, then don and parade in the petticoats and bonnets they found. While Columbia's few remaining firemen attempted in vain to extinguish fires, they often found their hoses cut or their lives threatened. Drunkenness was the prevailing state of mind. "I never before saw whiskey so profuse," William White noted, "nor so many under its influence. Totally convinced of the depravity of human nature, I and my friend returned to camp."

Stories of outrages in residences were commonplace. Dr. Robert W. Gibbes, Surgeon General of the Confederacy, managed to save his house several times from the flames before soldiers began entering his home around midnight and insisting on burning it from within. Gibbes escaped only with some bonds and cash while his priceless art, wine, book, and natural history collections—including more than 10,000 fossil and mineral artifacts and a collection of shark's teeth believed to be the finest in the world—were destroyed.

Looting of private residences became the norm in quick order. Mrs. J. J. Pringle Smith described one encounter with a drunk Union officer who insisted that she turn over all of the alcohol in the house, then threatened to shoot her servants when

she would not. Similarly, when one of Grace Brown Elmore's servants revealed to Union soldiers that an ornate sword was on the property, the soldiers refused to believe Elmore's truthful assertion that it had been carried away by the Confederates for safekeeping, threatening to kill another of her servants if she did not reveal its location. Louisa McCord, who lived immediately opposite the college grounds on Pendleton Street and whose home became Howard's headquarters, remembered her watch being ripped from her by an officer; only Howard's arrival immediately thereafter prevented the destruction of the house. Allen Morgan Geer of the 20th Illinois summed up the night nicely: "The wind blows in a hurricane all day. The troops go into camp, break ranks, and make for the city, the most for forage, many for plunders, some for whiskey and excitement, a few to burn and destroy, and I and Captain King for curiosity. As the flames spread from street to street, soldiers running wild, noisy, and intoxicated; citizens hurrying to and fro; women and children frightened and often weeping; the crash of falling buildings all presented a grand but sad scene of desolating ruin."

As the winds blew the fire further east, flames threatened and even occasionally caught the northern buildings of the South Carolina College, although dedicated efforts by the hospital staff there prevented the deaths of dozens of wounded Confederate and Union soldiers being cared for there. This did not stop a crowd of several hundred drunken soldiers from trying to overpower the guards left at the college gate to protect the hospitals in the morning; swearing that they would burn all of it down, the marauders relented only when Sherman himself was called in to

establish a renewed guard force for the campus. Meanwhile, the fire reached inferno status; as Emma LeConte described it, “a quivering molten ocean seemed to fill the air and sky.” Dozens of descriptions like hers fill the diaries and letters of northerner and southerner alike.

In spite of Union attempts to sanitize the events of that night in official reports, the realities were much worse. Outright murder abounded. As Robert Wilson reported to his own family two weeks after the fire, many people lost family, both black and white, with women and children among those killed. In one case, early in the day, Sherman and Mayor Goodwyn heard the report of a rifle, then found a black man dead in the street. In demanding from his men what had occurred, one Union man replied that the black man had been “impudent, and we shot him.” Sherman ordered them to quickly bury the body, or at least get it out of sight, then moved on without further disciplining his men. Rapes no doubt occurred, too. Columbia resident James G. Gibbes, according to Simms, rescued two women on the street from sexual assault by calling out to a nearby Union officer and brandishing his own gun to drive off their attackers. And such atrocities were not reserved for white women; Simms recounts another such attack on a black woman near Columbia who was ultimately drowned in a mud puddle by her attackers.

Other attacks exhibited a different kind of inhumanity. One Columbia woman, while in labor, was forced out of her home into the yard, only to watch her home be consigned to the flames by Union men. According to Harriott Middleton, another

woman, Raven Lewis, went into premature labor during the ordeal, then died a week later—along with her baby—presumably from the toll of her labor and stress over her safety. Still another woman, gravely incapacitated by illness at home, was attacked, robbed of her jewelry off her body, and verbally abused by the marauders; she died two days later. Beds were stabbed through with bayonets to drive out the children who hid in them and beneath them. Newly dug graves were unearthed as well, their coffins robbed and the bodies left out to rot. Such stories from both sides of the affair were commonplace. In one instance, the children of Melvin M. Cohen and the Union guard assigned to protect them watched helplessly as other Union troops entered their yard and beat in the brains of the family dog, with whom they'd been playing to distract themselves from the tragedy taking place outside their fence.

While many guards remained loyal to those they were assigned to protect, many others turned quickly on their charges. At the Ursuline Convent, the guards sent for Sister Baptista and the young nuns changed their minds and began looting the convent, ultimately departing when the building caught fire. At nearby St. Mary's College, marauding guards took possession of the church, drank the communion wine, filled the communion chalice with whiskey and drank that, took the Reverend Lawrence P. O'Connell prisoner, then set the building on fire. David Conyngham, a war correspondent for the *New York Herald* who accompanied Sherman throughout the duration of his southern march, claimed that he was shot at by a Union soldier for attempting to prevent the murder of another man. Worse, Conyngham said, not

once did the cavalry put on guard duty to prevent such outrages ever interfere with the groups that rushed into houses, pillaged them, then set them on fire.

Uncertain where to go or what to do, Columbians and refugees driven from their homes sought refuge in open spaces they believed safe. Some plunked down on bedding in the midst of Assembly Street, the western side of which had been mostly spared of flames. Others went slightly north to Sydney Park (modern Finlay Park), huddling in the cold and hoping they'd seen the worst. Sister Baptista, meanwhile, led her charges through the flames of Richardson Street and across Assembly Street to the graveyard at St. Peter's where they huddled on the stones, hoping not to be assaulted, a story verified by William White of the 90th Illinois, who saw them there and spoke briefly with the priest, the Reverend Dr. O'Connell, who came out to defend them. Others on the east side of town sought refuge in the large field just south of the South Carolina College Horseshoe, praying that the fire would not drift their way, even as the roofs of the northern campus buildings sometimes caught fire briefly. A bit to the north, at the Columbia Theological Seminary (today known as the Robert Mills House) immediately opposite from Union General John Logan's headquarters at the Hampton Preston Mansion, terrified Columbians occupied the seminary building, certain that the incendiaries would not dare to set afire a building so close to their commander's camp for the night. Annoyed Union officers responded by teasing that they would be barricaded and burned alive inside if they dared to go to sleep. And at the Asylum, near the junction of Bull Street and Upper Street, still more gathered for safety. Conyngham saw one woman there, "richly

dressed, with three pretty little children clinging to her. She was sitting on a mattress, while round her were strewn some rich paintings, works of art and virtue. It was a picture of hopeless misery surrounded by the trappings of refined taste and wealth.”

Around 3:00am, Union officers finally began to bring in units from the suburbs to help quell the violence. Hearing the call to guard duty, William White of the 90th Illinois noted, “For this purpose my company was able to muster four men, and one of them was so drunk, he thought we were going out to attack the enemy.” As a result of the total breakdown in discipline, Columbians were not the only ones who suffered that night. Robert Wilson, for example, reported that 150 Union troops were killed during the fire, many of them too drunk to move out of the flames or shot by other Union soldiers in the restoration of order. William White witnessed shocking forms of danger that took their own toll. Passing the new State House, he saw a pile of unexploded shells from the previous day’s shelling lying among the live coals. At that moment, another soldier wandering among the debris kicked one of the shells and was, as White put it, “sent to eternity in an instant.” Samuel H. M. Byers, the escaped prisoner, recounted a story in which 24 Union soldiers were killed in a single explosion in a residence, killed while carousing, as he put it. “Many of our soldiers,” he added, “were burnt up that night.”

Efforts to bring the mob under control also resulted in the deaths of dozens of Union troops, many never officially accounted for. Louisa McCord was told by General

Howard himself on the morning of February 18 that about seventy of his men had been shot the night before. According to Thomas Ward Osborn, Sherman's Chief of Artillery, when Brigadier General John Oliver's Third Brigade was brought in to secure control of the drunken men around 4:00am, many of the inebriated resisted. Osborn estimated that forty Union soldiers were simply shot on the spot for resisting, while unnumbered others too drunk to care for themselves simply died in the flames. Most of the reports in the Official Records of the campaign, including US Army Medical Director John Moore's report of casualties, are silent on the matter, not even mentioning the men killed on February 19 during an accidental explosion while ordnance were being destroyed at the riverfront. Only one report, that of Brigadier General John Oliver, detailed any casualties during the restoration of order, including killing two men, wounding 37, and arresting 370.

Nevertheless, the correspondence found in the Official Records hints at the prevailing mood of some soldiers even after the fires were put out. Major General Oliver O. Howard issued Special Field Orders No. 42 on the morning of February 18, which read, "It having been brought to the attention of the commanding general that certain lawless and evil-disposed soldiers of this command have threatened to destroy the remainder of this city with fire, it is ordered that all commanding officers and provost-marshals use the utmost vigilance by establishing sufficient guards and patrols to prevent at all cost, even to the taking the life of any refractory soldier, a recurrence of the horrors of last night."

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Many Union soldiers were haunted by what they saw in Columbia that night. Charles Wills of the 103rd Illinois filled his diary with his regret: "This gobbling of things so, disgusts me much. I think the city should be burned, but would like to see it done decently." Two weeks later, Wills added, "I heard some outrageous jokes today about a Golden Christ which was stolen by some of our thieves in Columbia, and in an inspection on the 26th it was found in a department headquarters wagon. They are too wicked to tell. This army has done some awful stealing." E. P. Burton, a surgeon with the 7th Illinois, was rattled by the preponderance of suffering: "This AM I took a walk around town and saw a sight I hope to never see again. All around the outskirts of the city were groups of women and children sitting on their little all that was left them. All looked tired. Many crying and despondent. Some all patient, submissive, and quiet. And some complaining terribly about the Yankees. I think a large proportion were poor and mostly women and children. I talked with some but it made me feel too bad to be endured." And what of the diarists of the 4th Minnesota, who began our story today and who camped just east of town on the night of February 17? One anonymous soldier of the 4th Minnesota recorded in his personal diary the following: "Hearing that much of the city had been destroyed during the night, I mounted my horse and after breakfast rode into the city. The scene presented almost defies description. Many families were in the streets with a few things saved from the flames. It is a terrible sight. Last night a host of drunken soldiers and negroes overpowered the guards and fired the city in several places. Families were driven out without warning, barely escaping with their lives. Quite a number of drunken soldiers were burned to death. Citizens were insulted. At three

o'clock in the morning a brigade of the Second Division was sent into town double-quick and quelled the mobs, arresting everyone. Some of them should be shot. For the first time I am ashamed of the Fifteenth Corps."

Jacob Ritner of the 25th Iowa Infantry, writing home to his wife, said, "I have no sympathy for rebels any place, especially in South Carolina. But no man, even if he had a heart of stone, could stand by and see women and children in such distress and not help them....It is supposed that the city was fired by escaped prisoners....I hope that whoever did it will be arrested and hung." Even Theodore Upson, whose account of the fire strained to exonerate his fellow troops of any wrongdoing whatsoever, acknowledged that some residents burned in their own homes because they could not get out.

While some were ashamed, other Union soldiers bragged of their exploits. Thomas R. Ford, writing home to family in March, claimed that he was the one who had set fire to the old State House, saying, "It made a nice fire. There was plenty of whiskey and tobacco in that place. We had a nice time for two days. This trip is the best thing in the world." Henry Wright told his parents, "Oh, such a time. It beat anything I ever seen. General Sherman was walking around in the street smoking his cigar. Logan was in the height of his glory, and General O. O. Howard had a squad of citizens up on the Square and was preaching to them. He told them it was the whiskey and not the soldiers." Others were just pleased to have made off with goods they otherwise would not have possessed. E. P. Burton, a surgeon in the 7th Illinois, noted in his

diary, "I picked up a nice white double blanket, at a big hotel just ready to burn."

Vett Noble, one of Sherman's headquarters clerks, gushed to his mother less than a month after the fire that he had secured a nice silver teapot for her and that his fellow soldiers were using much of the silver and silver plate from Columbia in their mess kits.

With dawn, Columbia's residents began to contemplate their future, as did the Union soldiers now preparing to leave town. Jacob Ritner of the 25th Iowa underscored a prevailing fear among those Columbians left behind: "The white folks were more afraid of their own negroes than they were of our soldiers. They did not dare to go into the street without a guard...and were dreading what the negroes would do after we left." Robert Wilson, writing to his brother just days after the fire, detailed the intensity of the devastation and the consequences for residents: "Hell was empty, and all its devils were in this devoted city, learning new devilling from Yankee teachers. A perfect reign of terror existed....Your father's life was threatened twice, and his trunk taken away with his sermons and the church plate....We were forced to leave the house with nothing but the clothes we had on, and it and the children were exposed in the woods, without any shelter, for a long time." Circumstances did not improve, as Wilson emphasized, "I lost everything....We have no outer clothing and no shoes but what we have on, no anything at all, but our cheerful hearts, our Christian resignation, and our unwhipped southern spirits."

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Official reports indicate that General Howard left a large supply of salt for the treatment of wounded and the curing of meat and ordered five hundred cattle to be brought into the city. Otherwise, local residents were encouraged to organize foraging parties to go outside of the city and procure supplies from areas that had already been heavily foraged by Sherman's men. Meanwhile, the vaunted "liberal supplies" that Union officers insisted they left behind for the Columbia residents consisted, as Louisa McCord described it, of "a few of the leanest stolen cows which they shut up in the camps without food or water until they nearly died." Survivors drew rations from a free market established in town for weeks after the fire, and many city residents relied on the charity of those outside the city, who sent wagonloads of food from the west, although Grace Brown Elmore reported that much of it was then delayed on the west side of the Congaree because of the lack of bridges or a suitable ferry and had to be brought across piecemeal in small flatboats. By early March, as the weather warmed, those who could find seeds began planting gardens within the city limits, but their benefits were still months away. Others, according to Louisa McCord, struggled to find food. Writing to family a month after the fire, she said, "Numbers live entirely from the supplies they get in that way (of course those who can pay for them), and I know that in the few times we have sent we scarcely ever get anything though. Mamma never sends now for she does not think it right to deprive those who really have nothing of the supplies they might get there."

The devastation at Columbia did little to deter Sherman's men from burning government buildings over the next two days, such as the State Armory and the Evans and Cogswell press that you know today as Publix, nor did it stop them from continuing their unofficial policy of burning most homes and other buildings they encountered on their way through the rest of South Carolina. Winnsboro would fall to the flames, as would parts of Longtown, Lancaster, Liberty Hill, Camden, Chesterfield, Cheraw, and Bennettsville. Robert Wallace Shand, who refugeed near Newberry while Columbia burned, described the scenes he encountered on his way back to town ten days after the fire: "Almost all the dwellings on the road we walked from near Alston to Columbia had been burned down, all cattle and work animals carried off, and well to do people were seen gathering up the corn left on the ground, where the horses were fed by the army, as their only chance for food." Those in Columbia—all the people, according to Shand—had it only slightly better, subsisting on flour, corn meal, and bacon sent down as charity by farmers in the upstate. Telegraph service in the city was not restored for more than a month, and the first newspaper did not appear until March 21, when Simms began publishing his accounts of the fire in the *Columbia Phoenix*.

Many Columbians simply left, trailing behind Sherman's men in the hope that they would enjoy both protection and provisions, especially slaves who tasted the possibility of freedom and Unionist Columbians who feared for their safety. Charles Wills of the 103rd Illinois estimated that they had fifty Columbia families trailing them, along with an uncountable number of former slaves. John Rath, another Union

soldier, detailed the problem for Sherman's men once they'd left Columbia:

"Thousands of refugees and [negroes] come with us. Their condition was deplorable and heart-sickening....Thousands of the negroes were barefooted, especially children that had to walk every foot of the way. Some of the whites were not much better off, but they all had some way they could ride." In the weeks that followed, many of those who had followed Sherman's men trickled back into Columbia.

According to Simms, a disproportionate number of them were blacks, many of whom, he says, had been forced to accompany Sherman, then returned when the rewards promised to them by freedom did not materialize. In other cases, as Harriott Middleton described to relatives a week after the fire, blacks were simply put out of wagons by Union soldiers who had grown tired of caring for them, then walked back to town because they had nowhere else to go.

The devastation of Columbia was staggering for Union and Confederate witnesses alike, although the extent of the damage remains in debate. In his narrative, Simms quite pointedly indicated that 84 of the city's 124 blocks—or three-fifths of the city, as he also expressed it—had been destroyed, with only the occasional house or building still standing within that territory. Simms also made some attempt to enumerate some of the buildings destroyed by the fire, and I've attempted to plot these enumerated points of destruction on two city maps of Columbia from this period. The first, from 1860, offers little in the way of landmarks and makes it difficult to appreciate the scale of destruction, either in terms of settlement patterns and density or the precision of building locations. Red areas indicate properties

destroyed during the conflagration between noon on February 17 and 6:00am on February 18, while yellow areas indicate properties destroyed by other means—either prior to the fire, such as in the case of the Charleston Depot and the Charlotte Depot—or by Union troops destroying government property in the days after the fire. The second map—a Bird's Eye View of Columbia from 1872—offers more visual context and perhaps makes it easier to understand the intensity and breadth of the destruction. We should exercise caution in reading too much about population density from the second map, though, since 1872 rebuilt Columbia was much more densely populated and spread out than 1865 Columbia was.

Nevertheless, there is a significant discrepancy between Simms's count of destroyed city blocks and his lists of known destroyed properties. As these maps show, a general estimate of destroyed blocks based on Simms's list of destroyed properties renders a total of perhaps 50 blocks, not 84, as Simms says. One explanation might be that Simms considered the destruction of a single home on a block located on the outskirts of the city limits to be evidence of the destruction of that city block, given that the home might have been the only one on that block in 1865. One such example is the house destroyed near the intersection of Harden and Taylor Streets. Another explanation might be that Simms simply ignored all but the most significant losses outside of the downtown business district. This possibility is buoyed by the account of Harriett Middleton, who suggested that everything to the west of the South Carolina College—which primarily consisted of poorer residences and smaller homes—was also destroyed.

As a result of these discrepancies, some historians have attempted to downplay the extent of the destruction, including Marion B. Lucas in his 1976 book *Sherman and the Burning of Columbia*, who suggested that only a third of the city was destroyed. Concluding that the entire fire was “an accident of war,” Lucas—who is frequently cited approvingly by modern historians—concluded that a much smaller group of intoxicated soldiers roamed the streets, few attacks were carried out on citizens, and the only authenticated deaths were those of two Union soldiers shot during the restoration of order. Much of his evidence was based on the testimony of Union officers in the 1873 *Mixed Commission on British and American Claims*, to which few Columbians offered testimony critical of the Union troops, probably because of their fears of arrest in a state still under military reconstruction. Nevertheless, Lucas ignored some of the most damning testimony from southerners, including that of Louisa McCord, whose statements of incontrovertible fact about the night were directly on point in demonstrating that Howard’s testimony to the Commission, at least, was filled with lies. Noting that enough buildings remained to house all the citizens who remained in Columbia and that Union authorities left enough food to feed them, Lucas also ignored numerous accounts from both sides of refugees squatting in large crowds in abandoned homes, poor residents living in the streets for weeks after the fire, and citizens scrambling to find food on a daily basis, often unsuccessfully.

Eyewitnesses, both northern and southern, tell a different story regarding the extent of destruction. Columbian Robert Wilson described the surviving portions of the city as ranging from “below Mrs. Guignard’s and opposite, on Blanding Street, and from Dr. LeConte’s down,” with only one or two homes remaining in the burnt district. Like Simms, General Oliver O. Howard, commander of Sherman’s Right Wing, estimated in his official report that about two thirds of the city, including all of the business part of town, were destroyed. Thomas Ward Osborn, Sherman’s Chief of Artillery, walked the city the day after the fire and said, “I judge three-fourths of the town is burned. The outskirts south and east of the town are left, including the college buildings, but not much besides this remains. All the densely built portion of the town is burned.” Two weeks after the fire on March 4, Grace Brown Elmore ventured out into the streets of Columbia for the first time to survey the destruction. “At least half the city is burnt,” she wrote. “We passed square after square, with only one or two houses on a block, in many cases not one. Main Street is a pile of ruins from beginning to end. To pass street after street and see nothing but the tall chimnies standing like giant watchmen of the surrounding ruins, to hear nothing cheerful, nothing lifelike, not even the barking of a dog, to see only here and there, a passing figure, or two old negro cronies talking under the breath of the horrors of that night was dreary in the extreme.” Louisa McCord, meanwhile, insisted that the destruction covered 86 squares, or four-fifths of the city.

On this point, Lucas is especially fast and loose with the evidence. Though he largely ignored Simms’s account of the horrific events on the night of February 17, he

privileged Simms's attempt to list destroyed buildings as being a definitive list of destroyed property. Then, for the purposes of further diminishing the significance of the fire, Lucas further reduced the count by ignoring the government property destroyed by Sherman's men on February 18 and 19, insisting that store buildings on Richardson Street were sometimes double-counted, and—apparently unaware that slaves typically lived on their owners' property—absurdly suggesting that the unlisted black residents of Columbia accounted for another 500 residential structures beyond the 600 white residences listed in the 1860 Columbia directory. In the end, his rationalization led to the conclusion that only 458 buildings—the ones listed by Simms—of 1300 presumed buildings—based on his strange math—were destroyed. Not once did Lucas reference a single eyewitness account other than Simms's list in describing the extent of the destruction. The fact remains, though, that numerous eyewitnesses on both sides suggested a burnt district that covered between 60 and 80% of the town.

In the wake of Columbia's devastation, few who were not there themselves could have appreciated the effect upon its citizens, both in the short and long term. David Conyngham, who had witnessed the fire, knew this. "Those who are unacquainted with war," he wrote, "cannot realize the fearful sufferings it entails on mankind. They read of it in papers and books, gilded over with all its false glare and strange fascinations, as a splendid game of glorious battles and triumphs, but close their eyes to its bloody horrors. The battlefield is to them a field of honor, a field of glory, where men resign their lives amidst the joys of conquest, which hallow the soldier's

gory couch and light up his death features with a smile. This sounds well in heroic fiction, but how different the reality! Though war may enrich the paymasters, contractors, and speculative politicians, who sport gorgeous equipages and rich palaces out of the blood of their countrymen, it crushes the people under its wheels, like the car of Juggernaut, and oppresses the millions with taxation.”

Columbia would one day recover, rise from the ashes, and become the center of new conflicts both local and national. But the scars remain. And as the city remembers the events of 150 years ago, many of those scars will be uncovered by the events of the coming weeks, perhaps even torn open again to some degree. Our task in remembering is not to lay new blame and certainly not to rewrite the history to make it easier for us to accept the actions of our ancestors. No, our responsibility is to understand, to the degree that we can and even though it pains us and makes us ashamed, what happened here on the night of February 17, 1865. We must also never stop inquiring why it happened, so that we might retain the slightest glimmer of hope at preventing such human tragedies when their possibility inevitably arises in the future.

Some notes on the text of this presentation: To assist the author visually during his presentation, the author eliminated some ellipses (representing gaps in original quoted material) that would otherwise appear in a scholarly format and corrected some spelling and usage issues from original material for clarity. In addition, in two cases the author altered the offensive word “niggers,” as used in the original source material, to “negroes” so as to avoid misunderstandings among the lay members of his audience. Because this text was delivered as a speech, the customary footnotes and source citations do not accompany the quoted material and are not inserted here. Finally, the presentation incorporated a PowerPoint presentation with approximately 25 slides showing artistic renderings and photographs of the destruction in Columbia as well as two maps referred to in the text of the presentation. These images are not reproduced here due to limitations on use imposed by the rights holders of these images.