

Sherman Enters Savannah

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When the Union army commanded by William Tecumseh Sherman arrived on the outskirts of Savannah, Georgia on December 10, 1864 the men had been on the move for almost a month. Leaving Atlanta on November 15, Sherman and his troops had moved forward relentlessly toward the Atlantic Ocean, leaving a trail of destruction as they lived off the land along their route. In addition to helping the Union win the war, Sherman's bold plan would revolutionize the way wars were fought.

Arriving at Savannah, Sherman found that Confederate forces under Lieutenant General William J. Hardee had set up formidable defenses. Over ten thousand rebels were entrenched in fortified positions and rice fields surrounding the city had been flooded. This left only narrow causeways as access to Savannah.

Despite their successful foraging along their march, the Union men were in desperate need of supplies. The food and equipment they needed awaited them in U.S. Navy ships under Admiral John Dahlgren just off the Savannah coast. Examining the situation, Sherman realized that if Confederate Fort McAllister could be taken he would have access to the Ogeechee river and from there to sea and Dahlgren's ships.

On December 13, Sherman sent a force of 4,000 men to take the fort. Working their way through obstructions that included land mines, something used rarely in the Civil War, the men stormed Fort McAllister and overwhelmed its two hundred defenders in only fifteen minutes. Sherman watched the battle from a nearby rice mill. The next day he took a boat down the river and out to Dahlgren's ships to confer with the admiral.

Now that he had access to supplies, Sherman could lay siege to Savannah. With the only access to the city through the heavily guarded causeways, Sherman was unwilling to go for an outright attack on Hardee's men even though his army outnumbered them six to one. Instead he

would wait them out. With Sherman's men surrounding the city on land and Dahlgren lurking off shore, it would not take long for the city and the Confederate soldiers to run out of food and drinkable water.

On December 17, Sherman sent a message to Hardee that stated:

I have already received guns that can cast heavy and destructive shot as far as the heart of your city; also, I have for some days held and controlled every avenue by which the people and garrison of Savannah can be supplied, and I am therefore justified in demanding the surrender of the city of Savannah, and its dependent forts, and shall wait a reasonable time for your answer, before opening with heavy ordnance. Should you entertain the proposition, I am prepared to grant liberal terms to the inhabitants and garrison; but should I be forced to resort to assault, or the slower and surer process of starvation, I shall then feel justified in resorting to the harshest measures, and shall make little effort to restrain my army—burning to avenge the national wrong which they attach to Savannah and other large cities which have been so prominent in dragging our country into civil war.

Instead of surrendering, Hardee decided to escape to fight another day. He and his men crossed the Savannah River on a pontoon bridge and made their way to North Carolina. The next day, the mayor of Savannah sent a message to Sherman offering to give up the city without resistance if they would promise to protect the citizens and their property. Sherman accepted and rode triumphant into the city on December 21, 1864. The next day, he sent a delighted Lincoln a telegram that read: "I beg to present you, as a Christmas gift, the city of Savannah, with 150 heavy guns and plenty of ammunition, and also about 25,000 bales of cotton."