

## **Sherman in the Carolinas**

**<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>**

During this week the “prospects were dark...for the Confederates in South Carolina,” and other parts of the South. Two major southern cities, Charleston and Columbia, fell to Federal troops with little opposition from the Confederate forces. Heavy skirmishing near the Congaree Creek, Savannah Creek, and other areas outside of Columbia occurred in the days leading up to the burning of the city. Beauregard and his troops quickly retreated from Columbia knowing they would not be able to defend it. Wade Hampton and his cavalry were also in the area during this time, coming down from Virginia, but they were no match for Sherman’s forces either.

On February 17, the mayor of Columbia surrendered the city to the Federal troops. Later that night, the city burned. Both sides were quick to blame the other; Sherman’s forces said Hampton’s men burned cotton bales earlier in the day, which were “fanned by the high winds that blew all day.” The Confederates blamed Sherman and his infamous “March to the Sea” campaign, which left much of Georgia scorched the previous year. For the next two days, Sherman’s forces continued to plunder and pillage the areas around Columbia, preventing any future use of railroad depots and supply houses for the confederates.

Others believed the culprits were drunken Negroes, soldiers, and released prisoners, for the fires sprang up at many places both in the center and in outlying neighborhoods. Confederates charged that Sherman deliberately burned the city as part of his destructive policy, or that at the very least it was his uncontrolled looters. A southern minister wrote, ‘Hell was empty, and all its devils were in this devoted city, learning new deviltry from Yankee teachers. A perfect reign of terror existed.’ The home of Wade Hampton, a fine house with a great library, and other plantation residences nearby met with flames. Southerners called it barbaric, but

Sherman at least left some cattle and other subsistence when he moved north. The burning of Columbia soon became to the South the symbol of the Federal invasion, the epic depredation of the war. The city fell to Union troops quickly and without much fighting.

In the following days, February 18-21, Federal troops marched north to North Carolina. Wilmington was in the Union's sights, as naval forces hit Fort Anderson on the Cape Fear River. Combined land and sea forces attacked Fort Anderson, causing the Confederates to retreat toward Wilmington. Fighting continued in other areas of the South during this time, most notably the Confederate attack of Fort Jones in Kentucky, several Federal operations throughout Mississippi and Alabama, and the attack on Fort Meyers in Florida.

Besides important military events, there were several interesting events related to the respected governments of the Confederacy and the United States that happened during this week. The Confederate House of Representatives passed a notion to allow for slaves to become soldiers, although the debate would be delayed in the Senate. The United States also voted on legislation during this time, "vot[ing] to repudiate all debts by Confederate governments" (640). In addition, the US Senate stalled the vote on admitting Louisiana back into the Union.

By February 21, things continued to look bleak for the Confederates. Two of the South's major cities, Columbia and Charleston, were now under Union control and more and more areas continued to fall by the day. Although Lee hoped to unite his army in Virginia, he wrote to his wife with a more resigned tone, noting Grant and Sherman's positions in the Carolinas and expecting their imminent attacks.

A dispirited Jefferson Davis in Richmond wrote Mobile editor John Forsyth, 'It is now becoming daily more evident to all reflecting persons that we are reduced to choosing whether the negroes shall fight for us or against us...' The Confederate Senate postponed debate on the

House bill authorizing use of slaves as soldiers. Gen. Lee wrote Sec. of War John C. Breckinridge of his plan to abandon the army's position on the James River if necessary. Lee hoped to unite the army about Burkeville, Va., and maintain communications south and west with other Confederate forces. He asked that Gen. Joseph E. Johnston be ordered to report for duty, as he was not certain of the health of Gen. Beauregard, now commanding in the Carolinas. To his wife, Lee sounded more discouraged. He expected Grant 'to move against us soon,' and Sherman in South Carolina and Schofield in North Carolina 'are both advancing and seem to have everything their own way....' Nevertheless, he vowed 'to fight to the last.'