

## **The Rise of William T. Sherman**

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On October 8, 1861, a Union general who would ultimately become one of the leading contributors to northern victory in the war began his rise to prominence. On that day, General William Tecumseh Sherman received an appointment to command the Union Army's Department of the Cumberland. The forty-one-year-old "Cump" Sherman had been born in Ohio in 1820, one of eleven children. Following his father's death in 1829, young William was raised by the family of prominent politician Thomas Ewing. Sherman's foster father helped him obtain an appointment to the United States Military Academy, where he graduated in 1840.

As a young officer Sherman served during the closing phases of the Second Seminole War, and on garrison duty in the south. At the end of the Mexican War he was posted to California, where he experienced the excitement of the subsequent Gold Rush. Leaving that new territory in 1850, Sherman came to Washington, D.C. and married Ellen Ewing, the daughter of his foster father. The newly-married officer, now promoted to captain, remained in the army until 1853, when he resigned his commission and accepted an offer to return to California as a bank manager. After the bank's closing in 1856, Sherman returned east, managing briefly another bank in New York, and then a legal venture in Kansas.

After an unsuccessful effort to rejoin the army, Sherman took the position as superintendant of the Louisiana State Seminary of Learning and Military Academy (later Louisiana State University). He remained there until early 1861, when the sectional crisis precipitated by the election of Abraham Lincoln led to Louisiana's secession. Leaving a state that had seceded for one that seemed in danger of doing so, he briefly settled in St. Louis, where

he ran a streetcar company for several months. The war's outbreak found the U.S. Army desperately in need of experienced officers to lead the large volunteer force then being recruited. In May, he travelled to Washington to lobby for reappointment into the army. This time he was successful, receiving a commission as colonel.

Sherman led a brigade at First Bull Run in July, performing capably in that Union defeat. This led to his promotion to brigadier general and his appointment to the Union Army's Department of the Cumberland, where he initially served under Robert Anderson, the hero of Fort Sumter. Anderson and Sherman worked hard to keep Kentucky in the Union during the summer and fall of 1861. Exhausted by the effort, Anderson's health failed and he was replaced by Sherman in early October, despite the fact that the Ohioan had allegedly been promised by President Lincoln that he would not be placed in a major position of command. Sherman's performance seemed to confirm his own doubts about his suitability for such a position. Historian John Marszalek writes that Sherman "sent hysterical letters and telegrams to officials in Washington, predicting a Union disaster in his department and demanding to be relieved of command at once." Within a month the War Department replaced Sherman and sent him to Missouri, where he continued to act erratically. Eventually he was given a leave of absence amidst wild newspaper charges that he had gone insane.

Sherman returned to Missouri in early 1862, holding a minor command until being assigned to Paducah, Kentucky. He next led a division in Ulysses S. Grant's army, beginning a long professional relationship between the two men that would last until Grant's death in 1885. Sherman took part in the battle of Shiloh and the siege of Corinth, Mississippi, before being assigned as military governor of Memphis. He then assisted Grant in operations against Vicksburg and Chattanooga and, following Grant's appointment as general-in-chief in early

1864, Sherman led three Union armies in the capture of Atlanta and the subsequent March to the Sea and March through the Carolinas. He remains one of the most successful yet controversial Federal generals of the Civil War.