

# **THE BURNING OF ATLANTA**



Atlanta wasn't the first North Georgia city to be razed that fall. A few days before the march began, Union troops burned Cassville, about 50 miles north of Atlanta. Five days later the manufacturing town of Rome was razed. The following day Sherman wired Maj. Gen. George Thomas in Nashville, "Last night we burned Rome and in two or more days will burn Atlanta." The next target was the railroad connecting Atlanta to Chattanooga, which had been Sherman's supply line since early September. The general decided to destroy miles of the line after the last train left Atlanta for the North on Nov. 12. The next day the rail town of Marietta was wrecked.

A new, politically appointed and youthful major named Henry Hitchcock joined Sherman at Marietta. Once shops and homes were caught up in the blaze Hitchcock commented to Sherman: "[The town will] burn down, sir."

"Yes," Sherman said. "Can't be stopped."

"Was that your intention?"

The general answered indirectly. "Can't save it ... There are men who do this," pointing to a group of passing soldiers. "Set as many guards as you please, they will slip in and set fire."

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For several days prior to the Nov. 15 March to the Sea departure, the elements of Sherman's army north of Atlanta converged on the city, destroying railroad tracks and communities as they approached. By the

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time they got to the city, demolition had become habitual. Gen. Henry W. Slocum, whose XX Corps occupied Atlanta after its capture, tried to protect private residences. But the provost guards, who could be relied on to carry out such orders, were concentrated downtown.

The first unauthorized fires started on Nov. 11 near the edge of town. The next morning Slocum offered a \$500 reward for the capture of the arsonists, but it was never collected. By Nov. 13, when an Illinois unit marched into Atlanta, a captain in the unit wrote in his diary, "The smoke almost blinded us." By Nov. 15, the city was on fire everywhere. By 3 p.m., officers who were distributing supplies at the commissary invited soldiers to simply take whatever they needed, because the out-of-control fires would inevitably consume the facility.

One Michigan sergeant conceded getting swept up in the inflammatory madness, even though he knew it was unauthorized: "As I was about to fire one place a little girl about ten years old came to me and said, 'Mr. Soldier you would not burn our house would you? If you did where would we live?' She looked at me with such a pleading look that ... I dropped the torch and walked away."

Starting with Sherman himself, many later justified the burning as military necessity. During the night of 15th, as the fire was in progress, Major Hitchcock overheard Sherman say that Atlanta deserved to be demolished because of its manufacturing capacity for military articles. The same night an Indiana sergeant wrote in his diary, "The entire city was destroyed [but] for a few occupied houses. It reminds me of the destruction of Babylon ... because of the wickedness of her people." Others falsely minimized the damage. In his memoirs, Sherman speciously claimed "the fire did not reach ... the great mass of dwelling houses." **But in a congratulatory order to his troops after arriving in Savannah, he wrote, "We quietly and deliberately destroyed Atlanta."**

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Still others accepted the reality of unauthorized burning, but incorrectly claimed it was accidental, or attributed it to impersonal factors. The wind did it. Too many soldiers discovered hidden liquor caches. The fiery march through communities north of Atlanta gave soldiers the impression that the city was to get the same treatment.

Perhaps the most widely accepted justification was the inherent cruelty of war. When a society accepts war as intrinsically cruel, those involved in wartime cruelties are exonerated. Again, **Sherman previously set the tone** when he responded to the Atlanta City Council's petition that he rescind his September order requiring nearly all civilians to evacuate:

**[I] shall not revoke my orders because they were not designed for the humanities of the case ... War is cruelty, and you cannot refine it ... Now you must go and take with you the old and feeble ... and build for them ... proper habitations to shield them against the [approaching winter] weather.**

But not all Union soldiers were satisfied with excuses. A Wisconsin private wrote, **"I believe this destruction of private property in Atlanta was entirely unnecessary and therefore ... disgraceful. ... The cruelties practiced on this campaign toward citizens have been enough to blast a more sacred cause than ours. ... There certainly is a lack of discipline."**

Partly because most of the source documents about Sherman's Atlanta burning are the official records of the federal armies, letters and diaries of Union soldiers, and reports in Northern publications, the story is often distorted. Since no Confederate units were present, and only a few sporadically nearby, there were few Confederate reports during the November 1864 inferno. Instead, historians must look to other primary sources, such as Southern newspapers, Georgia state documents, and civilian memoirs, diaries and letters. Their words tell a different version than the corresponding remarks of Union soldiers and newspapers.

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Eventually, Sherman's soldiers had little wish to write about the events of the first half of November 1864, because there was little to inspire pride. Sherman wrote almost nothing about Atlanta's Nov. 15-16 blaze in his memoirs (beyond claiming that "the great majority of dwellings" were spared).

While Sherman never ordered the wholesale burning of Atlanta, he did little to stop many of his increasingly undisciplined soldiers from escalating targeted destruction into arson and rioting. It is difficult to avoid concluding that he arranged matters so that he could deny responsibility if Atlanta's destruction became morally condemned, but accept credit if it was celebrated.

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*Sources: William T. Sherman, "Memoirs: Volume I"; Russell Bonds, "War Like a Thunderbolt"; Theodore Upson, "With Sherman to the Sea"; Stephen Davis, "What the Yankees Did to Us"; Michael Wortman, "The Bonfire"; Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series 1, Vol. 17, Part 1; John Walters, "Merchant of Terror"; Frances Elizabeth Gains, "We Begged to Hearts of Stone," Northwest Georgia Historical and Genealogical Quarterly (Winter 1988); Sergeant Allen Campbell to father, Dec. 21, 1864, quoted in Mark Hoffman, "My Brave Mechanics"; William Sherman to the representatives of the City Council of Atlanta, Sept. 12, 1864.*

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