

Why DID Union Troops Sack Asheville?

By

David P. Smith

(This was written several years ago, June 1998, in response to an article in the Mountain Express that was incredibly incorrect. Newspapers should check their sources before printing something that promotes stereotyping. - DPS)

After reading recent articles in the local press about the “sacking of Asheville by Federal Calvary¹”, I have felt compelled to add to it what I have discovered in the last few years. First, check your facts out! I have researched family histories for over twenty years now, and when I hear someone say that "everyone knows that story is true", I can tell you that it will cost you quite a bit of time, effort, and money to track down a 'fact' that probably never existed in the first place, and at best was taken out of context. It is very important that oral histories should be documented with facts whenever possible. Several times since I've lived here, I have heard the true natives of the area relate how the Federal Army came through Asheville under a flag of truce, passed safely, and then returned to ravage and waste the town. Anyone that was raised with the manners of our ancestors will have no problem relating why, even after all these years, such an act was unpardonable. But did it really happen? Yes, it certainly did. Why did it happen?

Who were they? General George Stoneman is best known for three cavalry raids. On his first raid he was ignominiously captured in Clinton, Georgia by Home Guards and paroled in October 1864. General Grant was not satisfied with Stoneman's record, and was in the process of having him released from command and replaced. However, General Stoneman had previously put forth a plan to destroy the railroad from Bristol to Wytheville, and to destroy the saltworks at Saltville, Virginia. His plan was to continue on to Salisbury, North Carolina, the site of a Confederate prison, where he would rescue the Federal soldiers imprisoned there. Before he could be replaced, he was allowed to undertake the first two parts of his objective in December 1864, which became a very successful raid (his second) that resulted in the destruction of the saltworks and redeemed him as a commander. In light of his success, General George Stoneman was made the Commander of the District of East Tennessee, in February 1865. His next assignment, which became his most famous exploit, was then given to him. It is commonly called "Stoneman's Last Raid" and was the second part of his original plan. General U.S. Grant wrote to General Thomas, Stoneman's superior officer, that General Stoneman might attack South Carolina, to complement the attack that General Sherman was undertaking through Georgia, and return by the way of Salisbury and free the prisoners. It was felt that Sherman would be tying up enough troops and Southern resources to enable Stoneman's drive toward Columbia, SC to succeed. As it happened, Sherman attacked and burned Columbia before Stoneman could get outfitted, and the plan changed to Stoneman dropping South Carolina as an objective. He was to sweep through eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina, free the prisoners, and return, causing as much destruction to the infrastructure as possible.

¹ A quick look at a dictionary shows us that *cavalry* is defined as combat troops mounted on horses, and *Calvary* is the place near Jerusalem where the crucifixion of Jesus took place. It is an important distinction.

To further understand what happened in Asheville, you must first get an understanding of the seemingly unimportant wording of an order issued by General Thomas, the person in charge of getting the ball in motion for the events that followed. Stoneman was instructed by Thomas "to destroy but not to fight battles, especially against anything like equal forces." As pointed out in the book "Stoneman's Last Raid" by Ina Van Noppen;

["The order to 'destroy' might be considered contrary to Paragraph Number 44 of "Instructions for the Government of Armies of the United States in the Field," which admonished: " ... all robbery, all pillage and sacking, ... all rape, wounding, maiming, or killing of such inhabitants, are prohibited under the penalty of death..." On the other hand, Paragraph Number 156 stated: "... [in a war of rebellion] The commander will throw the burden of the war, as much as lies within his power, on the disloyal citizens of the revolted portion or province..."²

Stoneman clearly was being tasked to destroy resources the enemy might use, demoralize the civilian population, and to avoid direct confrontations that would needlessly endanger his troops. It set the stage for the events in Asheville. The following has been extracted from the official records that pertain to this event. It might bore you with detail, but is full of fascinating facts.³

HDQRS. CAVALRY DIVISION, *DISTRICT OF EAST TENNESSEE*,
Greeneville, Tenn., April 25, 1865.

MAJOR: I have the honor to submit the following report of the operations of the cavalry, District of East Tennessee, from the 21st of March up to the present date. To prevent repetition I will merely say that from the time the division left Morristown, on the 23d of March, until the 17th of April, Major-General Stoneman, commanding the District of East Tennessee, accompanied the division, and that its movements were made in compliance with his instructions.

On the 19th I moved toward Asheville, by way of Swannanoa Gap, reaching the gap on the 20th. I found it to be effectually blockaded and defended by about 500 men with four pieces of artillery. Leaving Colonel Miller to deceive the enemy by feints, on 21st I moved to Rutherford, forty miles south of Swannanoa Gap, and by sundown on the 22d I had passed the Blue Ridge at Howard's Gap with but slight resistance and was in the enemy's rear. At daylight on the 23d the advance entered Hendersonville. Here I ascertained that the enemy had learned that I had left Swannanoa Gap and had been in Hendersonville the previous day with four pieces of artillery, but being able to hear nothing of us had returned toward Asheville late in the afternoon. I immediately ordered Colonel [Major] Slater, commanding the Eleventh Kentucky Cavalry, to pursue, attack, and capture this artillery at all hazards. The Eleventh Michigan was ordered to support the Eleventh Kentucky. At 12 m. the colonel reported he had overtaken the artillery twelve miles from Hendersonville, charged and captured the 4 pieces and 70 of its infantry guard. At Hendersonville about 300 stand of arms were captured. I also heard from Colonel Palmer that he had received my order to move to Rutherford; but after concentrating for the move had been informed by General Echols, of the rebel army, of the existence of the truce, and therefore has not moved. He was directed to comply with the previous order and establish his headquarters at Rutherford. I regarded the possession of one of the gaps of the Blue Ridge as being absolutely necessary to the safety of my command. At 12 p.m. I left Hendersonville, intending to attack Asheville the same evening. At 3 p.m. I received a flag of truce from General Martin at Asheville, stating that he had official notification of the truce. Later in the evening another flag of truce informed me that General

² "Stoneman's Last Raid" by Ina W. Van Noppen

³ MARCH 21-APRIL 25, 1865.--Expedition from E. TN. into SW Va. and W. NC No. 4.--Report of Brig. Gen. Alvan G. Gillem, U. S. Army, commanding Cavalry Division, District of East Tennessee, of operations March 21-April 25.

Martin would meet me next morning. At 11 p.m. I received an official announcement from General Sherman of the existence of the truce. General Sherman's order to General Stoneman to come to the railroad at Durham's Station or Hillsborough was received at 11 p.m. Being thoroughly convinced that the order had been given by General Sherman in the belief that the Cavalry Division was at or near Salisbury, when in fact it would have required a march of about 200 miles to have reached Durham's Station, and but sixty to our base at Greeneville, Tenn., after mature consideration I determined to march to the latter place, and accordingly when I met General Martin under flag of truce on the morning of the 24th I announced to him my decision to march to Greeneville, and at the same time suggested to him that it would be a great relief to the people if he could supply me with three days' rations, and thus avoid the necessity of stripping the citizens of their scanty supplies. The general agreed to my proposition, and furnished three days' rations of meal and all the meat they had on hand. At this meeting General Martin demanded the restoration of the battery captured the preceding day, basing his claim on the fact that the capture had been made after the date of the agreement between Generals Sherman and Johnston, though the existence might have been unknown to him and myself. Of course I declined restoring the battery, which with the piece captured at Morganton will arrive at this place on the 28th. But for the armistice it would have been easy to capture Asheville and its garrison. Colonel Palmer reports that after leaving Statesville he paroled over 2,000 prisoners.

I have the honor to be, very respectfully, your obedient servant,

ALVAN C. GILLEM,
Brigadier-General, U.S. Volunteers, Commanding Division.

Maj. G. M. BASCOM,
Asst. Adjt. Gen., Hdqrs. Dist. of East Tennessee, Knoxville.

The following information about the truce being broken comes from a book written about the Civil War in North Carolina, by John G. Barrett. In it he states "that General S. B. Brown, with a portion of his troops that had just passed through Asheville, returned and thoroughly ransacked the town.⁴ He has included the information by Mrs. Van Noppen that 'perhaps the reason the Second and Third Brigades returned to Asheville was that they had received subsequent orders. On April 24 General Thomas wrote to General Stoneman at Knoxville: The terms of surrender of Johnston to Sherman have been disapproved by the President, and Sherman is ordered to push his military advantages. Direct your cavalry to act in concert and do all in its power to bring Johnston to better terms.'"⁵

The Confederates also realized that the war was not yet over, as shown by the following record taken from official correspondence.⁶

DEMOPOLIS, ALA., April 30, 1865.

Capt. W. F. BULLOCK, Jr.,
Assistant Adjutant-General, Meridian, Miss.:

⁴ "The Civil War in North Carolina", by John G. Barrett, pp. 364-365

⁵ Van Noppen, "Stoneman's Raid," pp. 520-521

⁶ O.R.--SERIES I--VOLUME XLIX/2 [S# 104] Confederate Correspondence, Orders, And Returns Relating To Operations In Kentucky, Southwestern Virginia, Tennessee, Northern And Central Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, And West Florida, From March 16 To June 30, 1865.--
#7

The following information is just received from Lieutenant McConnell, of Henderson's scouts, dated Prattville, Ala., April 27, 6 a.m.:

The larger portion of Smith's forces is camped one mile above Jackson's Ferry, Alabama River. They have pontooned the river to the west side, and commit all manner of depredations. Smith says he is officially informed of the surrender of R. E. Lee with his whole army. I am almost certain that Lee has surrendered, but with only a small portion of his army, the balance scattering in all directions, while some have gone to Johnston. The truce only applies to the respective armies of each, and does not reach this department. Federals say that Johnston also has surrendered, but no official notice is given. No gun-boats or transports yet arrived. Smith's army short of provisions, and will subsist on the country if their boats do not get up. Wilson is encamped six miles from Macon, awaiting resumption of hostilities.

Lieutenant McConnell wishes instructions from General Forrest through me here. His boats reported in the Bigbee.

Please telegraph the above on to Lieut. Gen. N. B. Forrest, at Gainesville, Ala.

This is indeed the case. This excerpt from the Official Records shows that there was indeed an order to attack Asheville.⁷ While brief and to the point, probably because it was written by a Signal Officer, Lieut. Theodore Malay, Jr., it gave a day-by-day account of the movements of the Federal army and important events that needed to be noted.

April 2, closed station at 9 a.m.; command forded the river and joined First Brigade; marched to Mount Airy, N. C., and encamped at 8 p.m.; distance, thirty-three miles.

3d, moved at 5 a.m.; crossed Blue Ridge Mountains through Fancy Gap; halted at Hillsville, Va., at 1 p.m.; Colonel Miller ordered to Wytheville, Va., to cut railroad; command moved at 7 p.m.; captured and burned wagon train of twenty-seven wagons, having a brisk skirmish with the enemy; encamped at 1 a.m. on the 4th instant; distance, forty-three miles.

4th, marched at 6 a.m.; halted at Jacksonville, Va., at 1 a.m.; marched at 5 p.m.; reached Christiansburg, Va., at 1 a.m. 5th instant; distance, thirty-one miles; destroyed railroad from Wytheville to within a few miles of Lynchburg, Va.; captured Lynchburg paper of 4th instant, informing us of capture of Richmond.

6th, command moved at 7 p.m. to Taylorsville, N. C. [Va.], via Jacksonville, Va., crossing Blue Ridge at Mowbrey Gap; went into camp at Taylorsville, N. C. [Va.], at 11 p.m. on the 7th instant; distance, forty-eight miles. 9th, marched at 7 a.m.; halted at Danbury, N. C., at 4 p.m.; twenty-six miles, Colonel Palmer reporting having repulsed the enemy 300 strong at Martinsville, who retreated toward Lynchburg, Va.

10th instant, moved at 7 a.m.; arrived at Huntsville via Germantown at 10 a.m. 11th instant; distance, thirty-eight miles. Four hundred negroes who had followed the column sent under guard to Brigadier-General Tillson; marched at 2 p.m.; skirmished with the enemy during the afternoon; charged through the town of Mocksville, capturing a few prisoners; forded the river Yadkin at 2 a.m. on the 12th instant; skirmished with enemy at bridge four miles from Salisbury; carried the bridge and found the enemy in a strong position with artillery. Our forces brought on a general engagement and succeeded in capturing the place, 1,300 prisoners, 18 pieces of artillery, and a large amount of ordnance, quartermaster's, and commissary stores, &c. During the engagement Lieutenant Rice and myself occupied stations of observation under the fire of the enemy.

13th, the command moved at 2 p.m.; encamped at Taylorsville, [N. C.], at 12 m. on the 14th instant, destroying railroad depots, &c., on the route; distance marched, forty-seven miles.

⁷ O.R.--SERIES I--VOLUME XLIX/1 [S# 103] MARCH 21-APRIL 25, 1865.--Expedition from E. TN. into SW Va. and W. NC No. 3.--Report of Lieut. Theodore Malay, jr., Signal Corps, U. S. Army, Chief Signal Officer, District of East Tennessee, of operations March 20-May 30.

15th, marched at 10 a.m.; halted at Lenoir, N. C., for the night; distance, twenty-three miles. Endeavored to get communication with Brigadier-General Tillson, but failed to do so.

18th, command moved at 7 a.m.; found the enemy in force at the ford and bridge near Morganton, N. C.; skirmished with enemy for two hours. I occupied a station of observation and discovered their artillery where we were enabled to shell them from their position and captured the place with a few prisoners and one piece of artillery. Distance from Lenoir, sixteen miles.

19th, command marched twenty-three miles and encamped at Pleasant Garden.

20th, marched to Swannanoa Gap, in the Blue Ridge; found the enemy in force and turned back; halted for the night six miles from the gap.

21st, moved at 7 a.m.; went into camp at Rutherfordton at 8 p.m.; distance, thirty-four miles.

22d, received official notice of an armistice between Generals Sherman and Johnston. Command moved at 10 a.m.; halted at the top of the Blue Ridge at the Howard Gap; marched at 5 a.m. on the 23d instant; reached Andersonville [Hendersonville] at 8 a.m.; distance, thirty-eight miles. Marched at 3 p.m.; captured a four-gun battery on the way to Asheville.

24th, General Gillem was met by General Martin, C. S. Army, under flag of truce, who claimed the privilege of the armistice between Generals Sherman and Johnston. The command passed through town and after marching fifteen miles were ordered back to capture and hold Asheville, N.C.

26th, took possession of Asheville at 7 p.m., capturing a number of prisoners and 4 pieces of artillery.

29th, the command was ordered to pursue Jeff. Davis; marched twenty miles and halted for the night. 30th instant, command moved at 7 a.m.; crossed Blue Ridge Mountains at Saluda Gap; halted near Pickensville, S.C., at 7 p.m.; distance, thirty-one miles.

I have the honor to be, very respectfully, your obedient servant,

THEODORE MALLABY, JR.,
Second Lieutenant, Signal Corps, U. S. Army.

Capt. JOSEPH H. SPENCER,
Chief Signal Officer, Department of the Cumberland.

Facts about events in Asheville:

Obviously, the timing of events was critical here. The Federal Army was approaching Asheville from the east, after a successful campaign, trying to come through the Swannanoa Gap. The Southern forces occupied the gap, and were quite successful in stopping the advance. I've walked that gap, from the grave of an unknown Union soldier near the bottom, to the top. A push to the top would have been suicidal, a small force could have held it forever. The decision was made to go further down towards Hendersonville and approach Asheville from the south.

While the Federal army was on the march, word reached both sides that Lee had surrendered at Appomattox Courthouse and there was a truce in effect. Upon hearing this news, the southern troops hesitated, even refused to continue the fight, believing all to be lost. It was a rational decision made by men that had seen enough of war to grasp the obvious impact to them and their cause.

The two sides met under a flag of truce and the request for 9,000 rations for the Federal troops and safe passage through to Tennessee was made, since they were closer to Greenville, TN than

to Durham, NC. In return, the Federal troops were not to attack Asheville. All was agreed to and several officers from both sides dined together in Asheville that night.

The next day, the march was resumed and the Union troops passed through Asheville. However, they were overtaken by a courier a day's march to the west of Asheville. He brought the message that there was not a truce in effect, the hostilities had not ended, and they were to consider themselves still at war. At that point, the army turned back, and attacked Asheville, easily taking the town.

Conclusions: There are of course, those who would rewrite history and make it more favorable to whatever side they favored. The truth of the matter is that the Federal army performed as they should have. They were directed to return and fight by those higher above them in command. Whether they acted out of hand, should have disobeyed orders, caused undue hardships, behaved in undisciplined ways, and so on, can and will be debated forever. Usually, whoever writes the current edition of the history book, rules the perspective. How much information was lost by not being written down through the generations will never be known. But, while the southern troops lost the battle, and the northern troops won, and it was actually a small insignificant event, unless you happened to have been in it. Was it necessary? Probably not. Can it be rewritten or changed? No, not honestly. Can we learn from it? Depends on the individual. Will you, the reader, learn? It is up to you.

Who is the author? (1998) I am a native Western North Carolinian who has made Asheville my home since 1981. I am also a Civil War reenactor, serving with the 7th Tennessee dismounted cavalry, Company C. While researching my ancestors to better understand their part in history, I found that I had three direct Confederate ancestors, and at least three Federal ones. Two had served in the 26th Regiment of NC Troops (actually 30 individuals of one company was more or less related to me), one had served in the 22nd NC Troops, and the Federal ones served with the 3rd NC Mounted Infantry under Col. George W. Kirk, who took part in raids through Tennessee and Western North Carolina. It is very probable that a family whose roots are in the mountains, would also find relatives on both sides of the Civil War.

I also believe very strongly that reenactors should strive to educate through Living History programs and that we have both a duty, and the honor, to depict events as they actually were. Winning a battle the second time around, when it was lost the first time, speaks volumes about a person's lack of honor. Education is the key to better understanding of what happened. One's 'Southern Heritage' or 'Northern Heritage' should not be used as an excuse for ignorance. Heritage cannot be determined by geographical location alone. Past events should be used to teach the current generation how to better the world, not perpetuate that ignorance. In reality, no one won the war, we all lost much more; lives, pride, property, and our innocence. We need to go on, all of us together, and build a better world for everyone.

Author update (2019). I now live in Polk County, NC, on a small farm outside of Columbus. I am the Captain of a reenactment company based on Company A of the Second North Carolina Mounted Infantry, whose original members were primarily from eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina. We hold reenactments throughout the local area, based on Stoneman's Raid when possible. More information can be found at www.2ncmi.org