

As the new year dawned, the siege of Petersburg was over six months old. Rather than the quick marches and fluid maneuvers of the early war, the Civil War in the East had literally dug itself straight down into the earth. One dared not stick one's head above snow-capped trenchworks lest it be lost to sniper fire. Down the coast at Wilmington, North Carolina, the last major port still operable for the Confederacy, Federal land and naval forces pounded away at Fort Fisher. On Robert E. Lee's 58th birthday, January 19, Sherman's troops began leaving Savannah on what proved to be a most destructive, or punitive, march up through South Carolina, the mother of secession. By the end of the month, Lee was named General-in-Chief of all Confederate armies, hardly a desirable position considering the condition of things all over the Confederacy. Robert Lee remained with his beloved Army of Northern Virginia and did what he could to advise far-flung commands, hard-pressed at every point.

On February 3, a conference was held aboard the River Queen near Fortress Monroe, with Lincoln and Secretary of State William H. Seward attending on behalf of the United States, and Vice President Alexander H. Stephens the chief emissary for the South. What were the Confederacy's prospects and options for a negotiated peace? Lincoln held firm for the unconditional preservation of the Union, but implied liberal treatment of Southerners, a message repeated in his own malice toward no inaugural speech a month later.

February brought the fall of Wilmington, the evacuation of Charleston, and the capture of Columbia, South Carolina - the state capital - by Sherman's bummers, the name his Westerners had acquired from foraging liberally off the land. The better part of Columbia was burned to the ground in a huge fire started by smoldering cotton bales left by retreating Confederates, then spread by high winds and arsonist Yankees of Sherman's command. The general himself claimed he never gave an order to burn the capital city, and if he had intended to burn it, he would have done so and freely admitted it. In any event, tall, stark columns reaching to the sky from the ashes of Columbia's once elegant mansions and public buildings stood as monuments to the new era of warfare.

Sherman's troops entered North Carolina just after the first of March. Confronting him there were troops assembled under his old foe Joe Johnston. There would be some fighting and dying yet to come at Kinston, Fayetteville, Aversboro and Bentonville, but the war in this part of the country was all but over.

On March 13, President Davis signed into law a bill authorizing the recruitment of black troops to fight in Confederate service in exchange for their freedom. A year ago, before the fall of Atlanta and Wilmington, and before the siege lines had ringed Petersburg, when black units might have helped the Confederacy, General Patrick R. Cleburne proposed the recruitment of blacks and was severely denounced. He might have been drummed out of the army had he not been one of the best commanders the South had. Cleburne possibly was denied corps command because of his controversial idea, but now it was law, and Cleburne had died a division commander at Franklin the previous November.

The beginning of the end for the proud Confederacy began with rustling in the Army of the Potomac's camps in the last days of March. Lee's lines were stretched to breaking point at Petersburg, and break they did at the critical road junction of Five Forks when attacked on April 1. This action on Lee's extreme right flank exposed the South Side Railroad - a principal artery of supply and retreat - to Grant's grasp. Bad news reached President Davis as he prayed at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Richmond on Sunday morning, April 2: Richmond and Petersburg must be given up, and Lee was trying to extricate his army safely and get it moving westward. Many miles away, in Selma, Alabama, Nathan Bedford Forrest's command was beaten this same day. The last days of the Confederacy had arrived.

Everything of military value in Richmond was put to the torch by retreating Confederates. Grant's hordes marched through Petersburg and Richmond in pursuit of Lee's army on April 3. Even President Lincoln visited the conquered Rebel capital. As Davis fled south, Lincoln sat in his chair in Richmond. He, more than anyone, knew the trials and tribulations Davis had faced in this office.

Meanwhile, Lee's army struggled westward in need of supplies. He expected to find them at Amelia Court House, but they were not there. His army was deserting him, melting away into the woods, while the remnant still intact sought crossings of the Appomattox River. Then even worse news arrived, if that were possible - a substantial part of the army was cut off and captured at the Battle of Saylor's Creek on April 6. Three days later it was all over. Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox Court House, Virginia, on April 9, 1865. This effectively ended the Civil War, for the remaining

armies of the South soon followed suit, most notably Johnston's Army of Tennessee, which surrendered to Sherman on April 26, near Durham Station, North Carolina. The last land battle of the war occurred thousands of miles away near Brownsville, Texas, on May 12 - two days after Jefferson Davis was captured on the run in Georgia - and resulted in an inconsequential yet fairly won Confederate victory.

Two tragedies remained, even though the wholesale slaughter of Americans by Americans on the battlefield ended at the peace table in Wilmer McLean's parlor at Appomattox. On the evening of April 14, the same day the Stars and Stripes were run up Fort Sumter's flagpole after four long years, the actor John Wilkes Booth, embittered by the Union victory and emboldened by the fact that his family, mostly actors, had come to immortalize assassins - Shakespeare's plays supplied plenty of assassin-heroes - shot President Lincoln at Ford's Theatre. The president died the next morning, uttering not a word on his deathbed. A cohort of Booth nearly killed Secretary of State Seward in a brutal attack at the same time Booth struck, but the planned assassination of Vice President Andrew Johnson had little chance of success, due to an unwilling assassin, who nevertheless went to the gallows. Three other co-conspirators were hanged, including Mary Surratt, the first woman executed by the Federal government. Several other accomplices, unwitting or otherwise, received prison terms. Booth was trapped in the Garrett family's tobacco barn in Virginia on April 26 and shot by a cavalry sergeant who perhaps miscalculated Booth's reactions when the barn was set afire to flush him out. Booth died a short time later.

A cruel fate had one black card yet to play. As Booth breathed his last on the Garrett's porch in Virginia, a steamer loaded with returning prisoners of war from the Confederate prison camps at Andersonville and Cahaba was churning its way up the Mississippi River. Later that night, seven miles above Memphis, the Sultana's boilers exploded, killing upwards of 1,800 people, the worst maritime disaster in American history. The Sultana was overloaded by many times its legal carrying capacity, probably because greedy Union officers in charge of shipping the prisoner's home were receiving bribes from certain steamboat owners. Thus, the Grim Reaper gathered a final harvest of death even as peace and calm settled over a nation reunited.