

By February 20, most South Carolinians had learned of the doom that befell Columbia...

At Newberry, a short distance northwest of Columbia, Captain F.N. Walker, a Confederate enrolling officer, managed to rally one hundred men to protect the city. Pickets were posted and scouts sent out but to no purpose. Sherman moved his army to the east in the direction of Winnsboro.

As the Federal troops approached the historic and old town of Winnsboro, several of its few remaining male citizens “took to the woods.” At least one of those departing in great haste was returning to “hiding places of which he had become familiar during his frequent flights to escape conscription.” Soon Winnsboro was left with an adult male population of two, the Reverend W.W. Lord, rector of Christ Episcopal Church, and his four-hundred-pound vestryman, the village doctor. These two men visited the Federal camp in hope of securing a promise of protection for their village. Their efforts proved futile. Winnsboro was destined to be visited by the notorious “bummers” before the main army entered the town.

It was the lowing of driven cattle, the squawking of poultry, and the squealing of pigs that heralded the approach of Sherman’s army early on the morning of the 21st – not the drum and bugle. The “bummer” had already visited the fertile countryside and with his haul was on the outskirts of the village. Laughing, shouting, and cursing, these self-appointed foragers rode into Winnsboro. Dismounting, they immediately turned to pillaging and burning. “Like truants out of school,” said the Reverend Mr. Lord’s son, “these overgrown ‘Boys in Blue’ played snowball along the fire-lit streets with precious flour; made bonfires of hams and sides of bacon; set boxes and barrels of crackers afloat on streams of molasses and vinegar; fed horses from hats full of sugar.” All in all, they destroyed enough food to have fed the town for a year.

While this high carnival was being held amid burning stores downtown, the residential sections were not neglected. Many private homes were sacked and then burned. Chaplain John McCrae, Thirty-third Indiana, who had once lived near Winnsboro, did not have the heart to visit old acquaintances with “soldiers... everywhere pillaging, burning.”

The Episcopal Church, in the northwest corner of the town and away from the general conflagration, fell prey to the vindictive spirit of this group. It was alleged that before firing the building the men removed the organ so they might play “the devil’s tunes” on it. Calling upon the dead to view their fiendish deed, a coffin was exhumed from an adjacent grave, split open with an axe and stood on end so that its recently dead occupant might witness the spectacle.

General John W. Geary, leading the advance of the left wing, saw the heavy smoke rising from these fires and ordered his two most advanced regiments to move at “double-quick” in hope they would reach Winnsboro in time to arrest the flames. These two regiments, along with the remainder of the Second Division of the twentieth Corps, performed the part of firemen with great efficiency and soon had the fires under control. Learning that the “bummers” were not his men, Geary ordered the men back to their respective commands. He put Brigadier General N.

Pardee in charge of the town with orders to protect private property. Guards whose “conversation... was generally kind and indicated respect” were stationed throughout Winnsboro. But the possession of these qualities was not enough to curb all the disorders.

In all probability, between twenty and thirty buildings, including homes, stores, and public edifices, were destroyed in the town. The *Winnsboro News* estimated that between eight and ten stores were burned the first day and that the torch was applied to ten or twelve private homes on the second. General Geary in his official report stated that “one square was burned before the fire could be arrested.”

Pardee’s brigade remained on duty in Winnsboro on February 22 until all of the troops in the vicinity, comprising the Seventeenth, Twentieth, and Fourteenth Corps, had passed through the town.

Local persons gathered on the sidewalks to watch the army march by with bands playing and flags flying. Their joy at the departure of the enemy was dampened somewhat by the sight of former friends traveling in the refugee train...

At the urgent request of local citizens, General Geary left behind two mounted troopers from his provost guard to protect the town from stragglers. He was correct in assuming that Hampton would keep his word that any Federal soldiers left behind as safeguards after the departure of the main forces would be protected from arrest or injury if they fell into Confederate hands. The two guards organized the citizens of Winnsboro and drove out of town several stragglers, including six who had hidden in the court house tower, hoping to remain and loot the town after the army was out of sight. The next morning a detachment of Confederate cavalry rode into town, relieving the two guards of their duty. The men in gray showed the two Federal soldiers “every courtesy in their power,” and the people of the town openly expressed their gratitude to these two. The guards rejoined their command safely.

At Winnsboro the army was ordered to march east on the road to Cheraw. The right wing was to cross the Wateree River at Peay’s Ferry and the left wing, further north at Rocky Mount. The cavalry, previously instructed to make a strong demonstration on Chester, was then to turn east and cross the Wateree with the left wing.

Kilpatrick on his feint toward Chester halted at Monticello on the afternoon of February 20. The General learned, much to his delight, that this small place northwest of Columbia contained a “female institution,” but little did he dream that he would have to compete with two equally “Don Juanish” officers of the Fourteenth Corps for the attention of the young ladies. Two miles outside of Monticello was the camp of the Third Division of the Fourteenth Corps, among whose officers were Captain Dexter Horton and Colonel George Este. These two had decided that the surest way to get a visit with the fairer sex was to see that a regiment was sent to guard the seminary. They approached General Baird on the matter, but before they could get an answer, Kilpatrick rode up and announced to all that since his camp was in town he would take it upon himself to see that the young ladies were protected. Horton and Este were not to be outdone. They secured an ambulance, filled it with food stuffs, and went to the seminary themselves where they were received “very kindly.” That night, these two young officers

attended a “gay and festive dance,” with music furnished by the cavalry band. The next morning the outwitted Kilpatrick resumed the practice of war and moved along the railroad to within a short distance of Chester, destroying the track, as well as telegraph lines, as he went. This put the town “truly in a dark corner,” thought Charles Holst, a resident of Chester, but he was thankful to have a shelter over his head.

By February 23, the entire army had reached the Wateree and some divisions had crossed. Heavy rains set in on this date and lasted three days, causing the river to flood. At Rocky Mount the left wing encountered great difficulty in effecting a crossing. The bridge, heaving like a ship in a storm, held up under the crossing of the Twentieth Corps and the cavalry. Before Davis’ Fourteenth Corps could be put in motion, however it gave way to the logs and driftwood swept downstream by the swift current. The frail canvas boats used in the construction of the pontoon bridge were torn to pieces by this refuse, and rapidly rising waters and lack of proper materials rendered impossible an immediate reconstruction of the bridge. With the pioneers temporarily defeated, General Davis gave the order to attempt nothing further. The Fourteenth Corps, stranded on the west bank of the Wateree, could only await the recession of the waters.

Although the soldiers of the Twentieth Corps had crossed this treacherous body without mishap, difficulties befell them on the eastern bank where the heavy rains had made a steep hill on the approach to the river almost impassable. It took the supreme effort of man and beast to keep the wagons rolling through the sea of mud, and in places three feet deep. By nightfall of February 23 the corps had covered a mere five miles in the direction of Hanging Rock. Three succeeding days of continuous rainfall slowed the progress to a snail’s pace. The men, “slipping, stumbling, swearing, singing, and yelling,” finally arrived at Hanging Rock on February 26. They had marched only twenty miles in four days.

At Hanging Rock General Slocum, learning of Davis’ predicament, ordered the advance to halt while he himself rode back to the Wateree to expedite, if possible, the crossing of his other command. Sherman by this time had become exceedingly annoyed at the general delay caused by the Fourteenth Corps. He was ready to destroy the wagons, spike the cannons, shoot the mules belonging to Davis, and then ferry the men across if it was necessary to get the entire army on the move...

[Barrett, John G. *Sherman’s March Through the Carolinas*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983, 95-99.]