

Sherman's Army Occupies Winnsboro Feb. 21, 1865

The 1st Division of Sherman's 14th Corps, commanded by Gen. William Carlin, along with Bvt. Maj. Gen. Jefferson Davis commanding the 14th Corps, marched from the west and their encampment near Little River and the Ebenezer Meeting House. Carlin would write in his March 28, 1865 report (pg. 446, Part 1) that he "reached Winnsborough at 10.30 a.m.; halted outside of town, and Twentieth Corps took possession of the place..."

It would be the 2nd Division of Sherman's 20th Corps, commanded by Bvt. Maj. Gen. John Geary, marching from the southwest in lead of the column that would reach Winnsboro "without opposition at 11a.m." Yet, it would be the foragers – the bummers who often preceded the advance of the army – who would be the first to arrive in town and set the scene that Geary would later describe in his March 26, 1865 report (pg. 687, Part 1):

February 21, the division in advance, disencumbered, marched at 6.30 a.m. toward Winnsborough. When within two miles of the town I saw heavy smoke arising from it, and double-quickened my two advance regiments in order to reach it in time to arrest the conflagration. This we effected with much labor, my troops performing the part of firemen with great efficiency. About one square was burned before the fire could be arrested. A large number of foragers from various corps were found in the town. These were sent to their commands, and Brevet Brigadier-General Pardee, with his brigade, was directed to occupy the town, while my two other brigades commenced destroying the railroad northward... Winnsborough is a pretty town of about 2,500 population, the seat of justice for Fairfield District.

Lieut. Col. James Fitzpatrick, commanding the 28th Pennsylvania Infantry of Pardee's 1st. Brigade, in his March 31, 1865 report (pg. 722, Part 1) recorded that his "regiment assisted in putting out a very large fire which had been started by our advance foragers, and which at one time bid fair to destroy the town, but it was extinguished after burning but ten or fifteen very fine buildings."

Gen. Pardee in his April 3, 1865 report (pg. 707, Part 1) would describe these foragers and their actions as "men, in the most unlicensed manner, [that] had plundered the public and nearly all the private residences, and to the same body may be charged the firing of the town. As soon as possible the town was cleared of these foragers, or, as they might more properly be termed, plunderers, and measures taken to extinguish the flames... The quantity of cotton burned in Winnsborough without authority was about 1,000 bales."

Likely, some of the foragers were from the 14th Corps and Carlin would reference his displeasure with the 20th Corps' handling of the situation as they took possession of the town, "taking away all tobacco and everything else which our advance had placed under guard, arresting both men and officers, who were doing simply their duty." In a later correspondence to Gen. Howard, on February 23 (pg. 537, Part II), following a report from Cavalry Commander

Gen. Kilpatrick “that two of his foraging parties were murdered by the enemy after capture,” and harsh words of retaliation from Sherman, the commanding general would write: “I want the foragers, however, to be kept within reasonable bounds for the sake of discipline. I will not protect them when they enter dwellings and commit wanton waste, such as woman’s apparel, jewelry, and such things as are not needed by our army; but they may destroy cotton or tobacco, because these are assumed by the rebel Government to belong to it, and are used as a valuable source of revenue.”

Carlin’s 1st Division, which had “halted outside of town,” would move to the north end of Winnsboro stopping for dinner and two hours of rest, and continue their march northward at 2 p.m. and encamp at Adger’s on the railroad. Gen. Davis, moving with Carlin’s 1st Division, would remain in Winnsboro and be joined by Bvt. Maj. Gen. Alpheus Williams, commanding the 20th Corps; Maj. Gen. Henry Slocum, commanding Sherman’s Left Wing and moving with the 20th Corps; and with Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman. Gen. Sherman would enter Winnsboro from the south moving with Maj. Gen. Frank Blair’s 17th Corps from their encampment at Simpson on the railroad. Details of Blair’s 17th Corps had been destroying the entire length of the Charlotte, Columbia & Augusta Railroad from Columbia to Winnsboro. Davis would write that “the general-in-chief visited the Left Wing of the army and established his headquarters at Winnsborough.”

Gen. Geary continued to describe in his report the scene in Winnsboro on the following day:

February 22, my Second and Third Brigades continued destroying the railroad track toward White Oak Station. Pardee’s brigade remained on duty in Winnsborough until the rear of the army had passed through at 4.30 p.m., when we left the town by the road toward Rocky Mount Post-Office. During our occupation of Winnsborough the best of order was preserved and private property protected. Lieut. Gen. Wade Hampton, commanding the enemy’s cavalry forces, had left with the mayor a note pledging his word that any men of our army who might be left in the town as safeguards after the departure of the main forces should be protected from arrest or injury if overtaken by any of his troops. At the urgent request of the mayor and citizens I left two mounted men from my provost guard. The citizens of the town, after our departure, organized themselves under these two men, drove out a few stragglers from our army who came into the place, and preserved good order and security in the town until a detachment of Butler’s rebel cavalry entered the town the next morning, who showed my men every courtesy in their power. When the two guards left the people of the town crowded around them to express their gratitude. The men rejoined me safely the next morning. The incident was a very remarkable one in the midst of such a campaign as that of our army through South Carolina.

While in Winnsboro on February 21 Gen. Sherman wrote correspondences to Bvt. Maj. Gen. Judson Kilpatrick, commanding the Third Division Cavalry, and to Maj. Gen. Oliver Howard, commanding Sherman's Right Wing. He included in his correspondence to Howard from *Headquarters, Winnsborough, February 21, [1865] -- 6 p.m.* that "Generals Slocum and Davis are here... I will keep with the Twentieth Corps, which is Slocum's right." (pg. 513, Part II)

Nothing in the Official Records suggests that Gen. Sherman spent the night of February 21 in Winnsboro, only that he was here at 6 p.m. on that day. Sherman, along with Slocum, would move with the 20th Corps and cross the Catawba River at Rocky Mount on a pontoon bridge on February 23. The 17th Corps would continue the destruction of the railroad through Winnsboro and march east to Poplar Springs and cross the Wateree River on a pontoon bridge at Peay's Ferry also on February 23. Gen. Howard, moving with the 15th Corps, would cross at Peay's Ferry on the afternoon of February 22.

SOURCE: All referenced reports and correspondence cited are from Series I, Volume 47 of *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, DC, 1895; reprint by The National Historical Society, 1971).

The Tuesday, February 17, 2015 edition of *The State*, as part of its series *The Burning of Columbia*, ran a piece on 'Acts of compassion amid the ashes 150 years ago today.' Several historians and authors contributing to the article would include the following as an act of compassion "amid the carnage and flames."

"Union Gen. John W. Geary force-marched his men to Winnsboro to run out undisciplined elements of the Union army and put out the fires there, preventing another Columbia."