



Sherman's Army of Emancipation in Georgia:

“By the time their brief stay in Madison had ended, Sherman, Howard and Slocum were giving sober thought to a problem which had been growing steadily since they left Atlanta. What were they going to do with the hordes of Negroes who wanted to march with the troops to what they knew vaguely as “freedom?” In their confused minds they had generated and blossomed the firm belief that all they had to do when the Yankees came along was fall into line, with their squalling babies, their bleating, barking animals and their variegated personal possessions and follow the liberators to Paradise. At almost every crossroads community, and indeed at almost every plantation, there would be droves of them, eager, ready and waiting to join the procession. Many read deep religious meaning into the events they were witnessing. To them these marching men in blue were agents of God sent to earth to end their earthly troubles.

It never occurred to them that they might not be wanted or that there might not be enough food for both them and the army. Nor did they give a thought to where they would go, how they would be treated once they got there or what would happen to them eventually in that strange land in the North about which they had been dreaming, but about which they knew nothing. It took some strong talk to dissuade them from going along. Many who went anyhow soon wished they hadn't.

They (Sherman's troops) spread desolation broadcast---taking everything in their way in the breadth of about 20 miles. Corn, fodder, meal, flour, horses, mules, hogs, cattle, sheep, poultry of every description, servants that could be enticed and forced off, and these in great numbers, (were taken)... we heard of a great many private dwellings, gin houses, and much cotton burnt by the enemy on their different routes---some within sight; also that several private citizens were shot....In the country, families were frequently ill-treated and their houses sacked.

The Capitol building (in Milledgeville) was spared (from burning). General Slocum posted guards for the protection of private homes, but the troops nevertheless enjoyed full freedom in many, and in the Capitol and places of business. In the State Library on the first floor of the Capitol, Major Connolly looked on in strong disapproval, though without protesting, while a mob (of drunken soldiers and Negroes) attacked the accumulation of valuable volumes and carried away what struck their fancies. He blamed his commander in chief for allowing such a thing to happen...”Sherman will, some day, regret that he permitted this library to be destroyed and plundered.”

From other rooms drunken soldiers and Negroes grabbed up handfuls of valuable fossils and mineral specimens. Many left with armfuls of Georgia State bonds and paper currency, which they found in the treasurer's office. One colored man, dazzled by all this wealth, shouted his delight: “Bress de Lord, we're richer dan poor massa now!” Soon the soldiers and Negroes fell to fighting amongst themselves for the treasures.

(Sherman's) troops, satiated with food and leisure became bored, as armies do when they stop marching. So somebody suggested a mock session of the Georgia House of Representatives, using the seats, podium, gavel and other official paraphernalia left behind...The session opened with a round of drinking. A “Committee on Federal Relations” was appointed and retired to a committee room. Its members forgot all about Federal relations for a while and entered into an animated and noisy discussion of the comparative merits of various brands of (stolen) whiskey.

The “legislators” waiting for the “committee’s” report were not idle. General Kilpatrick, whose cavalymen had a reputation for heavy drinking and ruthless treatment of civilians and their property, kept them in high hilarity with recitals of his gallant campaigns against enemy wine cellars and whiskey storerooms. They had managed to draw up some resolutions....the Georgia Ordinance of Secession was termed “highly indiscreet and injudicious,” a “damned farce,” which is hereby repealed and abrogated.” They promised that Sherman’s men “will play the devil with the Ordinance and the State itself”...and also whip the State into the Union.

(Those 163 Days: A Southern Account of Sherman’s March, John M. Gibson, Bramhall House, 1961, pp. 45-51)

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