

## **General Sherman's March to the Sea**

From November 15 until December 21, 1864, Union General William T. Sherman led some 60,000 soldiers on a 285-mile march from Atlanta to Savannah, Georgia. The purpose of Sherman's March to the Sea was to frighten Georgia's civilian population into abandoning the Confederate cause. Sherman's soldiers did not destroy any of the towns in their path, but they stole food and livestock and burned the houses and barns of people who tried to fight back. The Yankees were "not only fighting hostile armies, but a hostile people," Sherman explained; as a result, they needed to "make old and young, rich and poor, feel the hard hand of war."

### **The Fall of Atlanta**

General Sherman's troops captured Atlanta on September 2, 1864. This was an important triumph, because Atlanta was a railroad hub and the industrial center of the Confederacy: It had munitions factories, foundries and warehouses that kept the Confederate army supplied with food, weapons and other goods. It stood between the Union Army and two of its most prized targets: the Gulf of Mexico to the west and Charleston to the East. It was also a symbol of Confederate pride and strength, and its fall made even the most loyal Southerners doubt that they could win the war. ("Since Atlanta," South Carolinian Mary Boykin Chestnut wrote in her diary, "I have felt as if...we are going to be wiped off the earth.")

Did you know? In the years after the Civil War, fighting forces around the world have made use of Sherman's "total war" strategy.

### **March to the Sea**

After they lost Atlanta, the Confederate army headed west into Tennessee and Alabama, attacking Union supply lines as they went. Sherman was reluctant to set off on a wild goose chase across the South, however, and so he split his troops into two groups. Major General George Thomas took some 60,000 men to meet the Confederates in Nashville, while Sherman took the remaining 62,000 on an offensive march through Georgia to Savannah, "smashing things" (he wrote) "to the sea."

### **"Make Georgia Howl"**

Sherman believed that the Confederacy derived its strength not from its fighting forces but from the material and moral support of sympathetic Southern whites. Factories, farms and railroads provided Confederate troops with the things they needed, he reasoned; and if he could destroy those things, the Confederate war effort would collapse. Meanwhile, his troops could undermine Southern morale by making life so unpleasant for Georgia's civilians that they would demand an end to the war.

To that end, Sherman's troops marched south toward Savannah in two wings, about 30 miles apart. On November 22, 3,500 Confederate cavalry started a skirmish with the Union soldiers at Griswoldville, but that ended so badly—650 Confederate soldiers were killed or wounded, compared to 62 Yankee casualties—that Southern troops initiated no more battles. Instead, they fled South ahead of Sherman's troops, wreaking their own havoc as they went: They wrecked bridges, chopped down trees and burned barns filled with provisions before the Union army could reach them.

The Union soldiers were just as unsparing. They raided farms and plantations, stealing and slaughtering cows, chickens, turkeys, sheep and hogs and taking as much other food—especially bread and potatoes—as they could carry. (These groups of foraging soldiers were nicknamed “bummers,” and they burned whatever they could not carry.) The marauding Yankees needed the supplies, but they also wanted to teach Georgians a lesson: “it isn't so sweet to secede,” one soldier wrote in a letter home, “as [they] thought it would be.”

Sherman's troops arrived in Savannah on December 21, 1864, about three weeks after they left Atlanta. The city was undefended when they got there. (The 10,000 Confederates who were supposed to be guarding it had already fled.) Sherman presented the city of Savannah and its 25,000 bales of cotton to President Lincoln as a Christmas gift. Early in 1865, Sherman and his men left Savannah and pillaged and burned their way through South Carolina to Charleston. In April, the Confederacy surrendered and the war was over.

## **Total War**

Sherman's “total war” in Georgia was brutal and destructive, but it did just what it was supposed to do: it hurt Southern morale, made it impossible for the Confederates to fight at full capacity and likely hastened the end of the war. “This Union and its Government must be sustained, at any and every cost,” explained one of Sherman's subordinates. “To sustain it, we must war upon and destroy the organized rebel forces,—must cut off their supplies, destroy their communications...and produce among the people of Georgia a thorough conviction of the personal misery which attends war, and the utter helplessness and inability of their ‘rulers’ to protect them...If that terror and grief and even want shall help to paralyze their husbands and fathers who are fighting us...it is mercy in the end.”