

The Unfortunate Elite: Southern Women and Their Accounts of Sherman's Army

Heath Milo

When considering the ways in which civilians reacted to the American Civil War, perhaps no campaign deserves more attention than General William Tecumseh Sherman's infamous march through Georgia and the Carolinas in 1864 and 1865, respectively. Given the hostile residents of the Confederacy, Sherman believed there to be no benefit in occupying Georgia. Instead, he argued that a campaign of destruction aimed at infrastructure, supplies, and the will of the people would be the more strategically sound option.¹ Sherman's army spent November and December of 1864 making their way from Atlanta to Savannah, then headed north through the Carolinas in the New Year, leaving a trail of carnage and woe.

Despite a seemingly endless supply of southern outrage at the actions of Sherman's army, first hand accounts of civilians are somewhat limited, not only in quantity, but in representation. By 1864 very few men remained on their homesteads as most had gone off to war, leaving a disproportionate population of wives and widows. Furthermore, the foraging efforts of Union soldiers limited most of their interactions with Southerners to those who were most likely to have supplies, particularly southern elite women. Not only did these women typically have ample supplies for their families and slaves, but they were also educated and had the means of keeping journals. It is from these women that most first-hand accounts were created, as well as the stories of Sherman's terror that permeated southern culture in the final year of the war and beyond.

The diaries of elite southern women reflect their particular concerns, but are still valuable in regards to gaining a better understanding of civilian life under Sherman's campaign. They show not only the destruction that civilians were subjected to, but also its limitations. They also reveal much about the way southern women viewed the world and their place within it. In many cases, women were robbed of their possessions, but were intentionally left unharmed. Although outrage is to be expected in their memoirs, the extent to which invaders are described as inhuman or purely evil is noteworthy. In some cases, women who were relatively unscathed had the harshest words for soldiers who were "ungentlemanly."² The written accounts of southern elite women, viewed in hindsight, do not offer the damning portrayal of Sherman's army that their authors intended. Ultimately, the army showed a remarkable level of restraint, given its objectives and the prejudices of its soldiers.

¹ Mark Grimsbey, *The Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy Toward Southern Civilians 1861-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 190.

² Lisa Tendrich Frank, "Bedrooms as Battlefields: The Role of Gender Politics in Sherman's March," in *Occupied Women*, eds. LeeAnn Whites and Alecia P. Long (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), 42.

Dolly Lunt Burge was a widow and slave owner who lived on a plantation 900 acres in size near Covington, Georgia. Two days after receiving word that Sherman's army had left Atlanta, she saw fires in the distance before meeting Union soldiers face to face.³ Burge recorded her shock and outrage at the confiscation of her food, animals, and slaves in her diary. While her despair is clear, Burge's diary also exposes much about her place in the world. When describing the raid, she writes that "[t]he thousand pounds of meat in my smoke-house is gone in a twinkling," before going on to describe the loss of lard, butter, eggs, pigs, hens and "eighteen fat turkeys."⁴ Two things become clear from Burge's list of stolen and destroyed goods. First, Sherman's army seized a small fortune's worth of goods from her. Second, Burge had an impressive amount of food and supplies compared to what one might expect from a Georgia war widow in 1864.

After describing her lost food and livestock, Burge wrote about the loss of her horses and then finally her slaves. Interestingly, the confiscation of her slaves did not result in anger over the theft of her property, but instead revealed her despair over the fate of her slaves: "My poor boys, my poor boys, what unknown trials are before you. How you have clung to your mistress & assisted her in every way you knew how. You have never known want of any kind."⁵ Burge's reaction to the confiscation of her slaves is significant in that she honestly believed her slaves were better off with her and interpreted their emancipation as an evil act, stating that "[Southerners] have never made the poor, cowardly negro fight."⁶

Burge's account reveals the limits of the Union's destructive efforts, both in fact, as well as in her perception. Throughout her diary, Burge mentioned interactions with a guard who was apparently tasked with protecting her. After telling her slaves to hide from the soldiers, she went outside to "claim protection & a guard" and then later complained that the guard would not stop soldiers from taking her property because they had been ordered to do so.⁷ Burge's interaction with her guard shows that although Sherman's army was engaged in a strategy of destruction, this destruction was limited. Sherman's troops still protected southern civilians from potential abuse. Burge's experience in having a guard is not unique, either. In a diary entry by one soldier in Sherman's army, he noted one day that his company's men were "scattered over town as provost guards to protect the property [of citizens]."⁸ Furthermore, Burge wrote that she had claimed a guard rather than being assigned one for protection. Burge fully expected this limitation to exist, which suggests that it was typical of southern women to have confidence that they would

³ Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War*, 196.

⁴ James I. Robertson, Jr., "The Diary of Dolly Lunt Burge," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (1961): 370.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 371.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 370.

⁸ Jeffrey L. Patrick and Robert Willey, "'We have surely done a big work': The Diary of a Hoosier Soldier on Sherman's 'March to the Sea,'" *Indiana Magazine of History* 94, no. 3 (1998): 226.

not be personally violated. Burge clearly suffered at the hands of Union foragers, but her house was still standing in the aftermath and she even was able to keep some of her slaves, at least for the time being.

Burge's expectation of personal safety was not unfounded. While sexual assaults did occur during Sherman's march, they were remarkably limited,⁹ and where they were known to occur, there was punishment. In one instance, Sergeant Arthur McCarty was found guilty of rape after three soldiers testified as witnesses against him. McCarty was dishonorably discharged and sentenced to two years in prison but managed to avoid serving his entire term after President Andrew Johnson restored him to active duty.¹⁰ Despite McCarty's ability to avoid paying his debt to society, his conviction shows that Sherman's army took sexual assaults seriously, to the point that three soldiers were willing to publicly testify against a sergeant in defense of a Confederate woman. Whether stationing their own guards to defend their enemy or testifying against their own superior officers in a criminal trial, some of Sherman's soldiers evidently strove to maintain an ethical code, even in the context of their arguably unethical campaign. Sherman's code sought to limit destruction to that which could be used to serve the Confederate army.

While the March to the Sea and the Carolinian campaign certainly brought hardship upon southern civilians, the army strived to treat those civilians well. However, as Joseph T. Glatthaar argues, this was a standard that the soldiers fell short of on multiple occasions. Glatthaar notes that just as instances of violence against African Americans and even fellow soldiers occurred within Sherman's ranks, so too were they committed against Southerners. These acts included hanging civilian men who refused to divulge the location of their valuables, and a drunken soldier who murdered a southern boy while attempting to rob him.¹¹ While some of these acts were considered to be the natural consequences of war, others were not tolerated. In the case of the attempted robbery, the soldier was found guilty of murder by court martial and sentenced to death by firing squad.¹² The different policy from one murder to another ultimately revolves around discipline. While the hanging of a civilian refusing to cooperate is extreme, those soldiers were ordered to seize the goods of their victims. In the case of the attempted robbery, however, the guilty soldier was acting of his own volition. Both of these examples describe terrible acts committed on civilians, but one instance describes soldiers acting in a way that was arguably within the scope of Sherman's strategy and the other was not. Once again, a moral code among these Union soldiers can be observed.

Southern elite women were often targeted by Sherman's soldiers for more reasons than their likelihood of having supplies. As Lisa Tendrich Frank argues, soldiers saw in southern women a way to demoralize the enemy in what they perceived to be a relatively harmless way. By invading the feminine sphere these

⁹ Frank, "Bedrooms as Battlefields," 44.

¹⁰ Joseph T. Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond: Sherman's Troops in the Savannah and Carolinas Campaigns* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 74.

¹¹ Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond*, 73.

¹² *Ibid.*

men were able to demoralize women without physically harming them. In many cases soldiers entered southern women's bedrooms, an act considered to be highly inappropriate, and went through private possessions from personal letters to lingerie.¹³ For many southern women, these actions were categorically unforgiveable, giving Union soldiers a unique opportunity to inflict personal humiliation upon their enemies without violating the orders of their superiors. For many southern women, the very thought of a soldier entering their bedroom was so unimaginable that they often filled their rooms with property and supplies. Valuables were often hidden within mattresses or by other means, but food and other supplies were often visible, taking up any available space the bedroom had to offer. Ironically, this misguided confidence that no soldier would dare enter a lady's bedroom was leveraged to the point that soldiers soon realized the bedroom was among the most likely places to find food and valuables.¹⁴ For many southern women, this unintentional encouragement to invade their private rooms resulted in a far more outrageous encounter than might have otherwise occurred. Several women's accounts lament not the loss or destruction of property, but the humiliation endured from soldiers entering the sanctuary that was a lady's bedroom. As one Georgian woman stated, "There is no word in the English language strong enough to express our hatred and contempt for an enemy so degraded—if they were *gentlemen* we could bear it better."¹⁵

Despite the conclusions drawn by many southern women, these personal attacks were not considered by soldiers to be arbitrarily malicious. Although Sherman's army saw relatively few white Southerners in their travels, it became apparent almost immediately to them that there was an alarming level of social stratification resulting in an extremely wealthy few and an extremely poor general population.¹⁶ Union officers observed that they had trouble in perceiving the social difference between African American slaves and most of the southern poor. Poor whites were not only destitute, but there were no observable means for social mobility. They were poorly educated and had no access to good schools or any other means of improving their situation. In the view of Sherman's men, these white Southerners were being subjugated to similar extent that African American slaves were.¹⁷ For many soldiers, the state in which these poor whites lived was completely unacceptable in a society where there was no shortage of food and clear opportunities for prosperity. In witnessing a society where elite women still wore fine silk dresses to church in the midst of a warzone while their neighbours starved, Union soldiers not only became contemptuous of the southern elite, but were also able to clearly identify which civilians were appropriate targets in their effort to break the will of the South.

¹³ Frank, "Bedrooms as Battlefields," 34.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁶ Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond*, 67.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

Emma LeConte was seventeen years old when Sherman's army reached her family's home in Columbia, South Carolina. Having heard about Sherman's march through Georgia, however, she had been anticipating the encounter for months. In reading her diary, this anticipation becomes almost comical as LeConte describes the extravagant bazaar she attended in January 1865 or her concern that her mother needed to ration the remaining bottles of champagne so that they would have something to drink when there was finally peace.¹⁸ LeConte's journal serves as an interesting case study in that she was very well-educated and followed the events of the war as closely as possible, and yet was still a seventeen year old naïve southern elite girl at the time of her writing. In a single entry after receiving a letter from her father who was serving in the Confederate army, she expressed the sheer joy of knowing her father was alive, followed immediately by traumatic despair that he had to work "like a negro."¹⁹ This entry is reflective of LeConte's entire diary, which reveals compelling vulnerability in the face of tragedy and an aloof sense of entitlement that often resulted in hypocrisy.

Much like Dolly Lunt Burge, LeConte feared that Sherman's soldiers would eventually take everything her family had, and at the same time was absolutely confident that she would not be personally violated. In one entry she described sewing secret pockets to the interior of her hoop skirt to hide her valuables, writing "they will hardly search our persons."²⁰ LeConte was so sure that she would not be touched by a Union soldier that she was willing to hide property on her own person while at the same time assuming that Sherman's army would burn the entire city of Columbia to the ground. This duality of expectation suggests that on one hand LeConte understood that she was the enemy of the soldiers that had been destroying everything in their path for months, but on the other hand she as a person was quite literally untouchable. Interestingly, this assumption of virtual invincibility did not prevent her from considering herself to be among the most unfortunate victims of Sherman's campaign:

I ran upstairs to my bedroom windows just in time to see the U. S. flag run up over the State House. Oh what a horrid sight! What a degradation! After four long bitter years of bloodshed and hatred, now to float there at last! That hateful symbol of despotism! I do not think I could possibly describe my feelings.²¹

LeConte's hypocrisy of being a slave owner complaining of despotism is one that is typical of 1865 South Carolina elites. But her social status afforded her relative safety in comparison to most South Carolina whites. Even as Columbia was subjected to one of the harshest and most destructive assaults in the entire war over the next

¹⁸ Earl Schenck Miers, ed., *When the World Ended: The Diary of Emma LeConte* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 20.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

few days, LeConte's house was assigned a guard and remained standing when Sherman's army finally moved on.

Despite their expectation of personal safety, southern women were generally terrified of encountering Sherman's army. Union soldiers observed and eventually became accustomed to expressions of petrified fear everywhere they went. Tall tales and exaggerations of brutality preceded Sherman's men and amused soldiers wrote home about their reputation for cutting off fingers to steal women's rings or tearing out earrings at will.²² These stories were not limited to Sherman's path of destruction. Stories soon spread throughout the South as exaggerated first hand accounts evolved into unrealistic second-hand accounts. Discussion of Sherman's campaign became common and fear was accompanied by hatred.

Kate Cumming was a southern lady with a somewhat unique experience compared to her peers. While her friends sought to maintain their elegant lifestyle throughout the war, Cumming served as a nurse for the Confederate army from 1862 to 1865. Cumming was relocated several times throughout the war, but spent most of her time in Alabama and Georgia. As a nurse, she was never on the frontlines of battle, but treated soldiers who engaged Sherman's army directly, both before and after the fall of Atlanta. Cumming's diary is different than the journals of Burge and LeConte in that she never dealt with Sherman's army directly, but her story is still valuable because she was constantly relocated to be in orbit of Sherman's movements. Her stories of Sherman's March were second-hand, but she heard many first-hand and second-hand accounts from soldiers as well as civilians. Her diary not only casts a wider net than a single first-hand account, but also illustrates the larger southern impression of Sherman's army as it marched through Georgia and the Carolinas.

As a frequent witness to the suffering endured by soldiers not only from injury or sickness, but from a seemingly constant shortage of food, Cumming was understandably outraged at the stories of Sherman's army destroying food everywhere they went.²³ Comparing Cumming's perception of food shortage to Burge's simultaneous complaint of having 1,000 pounds of meat taken from her by Union soldiers helps to illustrate the problems with vilifying Sherman categorically. Cumming witnessed the suffering of her countrymen because of a shortage of food while Union soldiers were destroying crops and livestock. However, Burge and other southern women's hoarding of food and supplies not only left Confederate soldiers and civilians starving, but also made Sherman's job easier by concentrating a disproportionate amount of supplies on one homestead. Furthermore, when Cumming had a chance to ask a Confederate officer how the South planned to respond to Sherman's March, he confided in her that the Confederates planned to ride out ahead of the Union soldiers and destroy everything before they had a chance to get it.²⁴

²² Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond*, 70.

²³ Richard Harwell, ed., *The Journal of Kate Cumming: A Confederate Nurse 1862-1865* (Savannah: The Beehive Press, 1975), 220.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Despite having all the information she needed to see the role that Confederate civilians were playing in their own suffering, Cumming did as most Southerners did and focused her anger towards General Sherman. On several occasions she described the dread that Sherman instilled upon her, writing "[t]he very name Sherman brings up woe and desolation before us.... Bands of marauders, black and white, are sent through the country to do their worst on the helpless inhabitants."²⁵ In this and other instances, Cumming's description of the demoralizing effects of Sherman's army were not presented as a personal experience, but rather as the experience of a people. In another entry made during a time when Cumming was being relocated, she noted that everywhere she went the only topic of conversation that seemed to be heard anywhere was the stories of barbarous acts being perpetuated by Sherman's soldiers.²⁶ Cumming's consistent observation throughout her travels shows that the impact of Sherman's campaign was not limited to those that encountered his soldiers. His effort to break the will of the South was clearly having an impact far beyond his path of destruction.

The vile reputation attributed to Sherman's men grew from a mix of fact and fiction, one that was perpetuated by both soldier and civilian. Even General Sherman himself acknowledged that soldiers occasionally went too far in their destruction and confiscation.²⁷ In addition to trivializing the sanctity of women's bedrooms, Union soldiers actively attempted to perpetuate the myths of their own barbarity. For example, when soldiers entered the home of Pauline DeCaradeuc, they tore up her lingerie to use as handkerchiefs and lied to her that they had been ordered to arrest and kill every prominent South Carolinian with whom they came into contact.²⁸ Although DeCaradeuc was not in any real danger and her house was not destroyed, Union soldiers did not hesitate to make her think otherwise. In another case, a Georgian woman attempted to stop soldiers from entering her home by tossing scalding hot water at them. Even after this attack she was not harmed but was instead humiliated as the soldiers dunked her into a barrel of molasses in order to "sweeten her temper."²⁹ While others were less fortunate in their encounters with Sherman's army, these examples show that at least in some cases, soldiers did not physically harm the civilians they encountered, but instead were more interested in hurting their pride.

Perhaps the most interesting contrast to the reputation earned by Sherman's army can be found in the numerous documented acts of kindness towards southern civilians that occurred throughout the campaign. In addition to protecting women, Union soldiers were consistently known to share rations with hungry Southerners

²⁵ Ibid., 240.

²⁶ Ibid., 243.

²⁷ Stephen V. Ash, *When the Yankees Came: Conflict & Chaos in the Occupied South, 1861-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 56.

²⁸ Frank, "Bedrooms as Battlefields," 43.

²⁹ Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond*, 71.

from Atlanta to North Carolina.³⁰ During their Christmas stay in Savannah, Union soldiers raised money for a local orphanage and even dressed up a mule as a reindeer before using it to deliver food to the poor.³¹ These are but a few examples of the humane actions carried out by Sherman's army and, although they must be weighed against the terrors purposely carried out during their march, they help to illustrate the limited perspective of southern elite women who witnessed their property seized.

For many of these soldiers, their role in the war was not one in which they took pleasure, but it was rather a necessary evil that would help lead the Union to victory. Some soldiers took delight in pillaging the mansions of the South, but many others expressed in their letters a feeling of remorse at their actions accompanied with a professed understanding of the campaign's greater purpose.³² Much like the diaries of southern elite women, the writings of these soldiers only offer a limited perspective.

Ultimately, it cannot be denied that Sherman's army wrought a remarkable level of civilian destruction upon Georgia and the Carolinas. First-hand written accounts do not provide the entire picture, but they do accurately describe the kinds of property seizure and destruction that took place. As Dolly Lunt Burge described in detail, immense quantities of food and livestock were taken with little sympathy in exchange. But despite her anger and indignation, this destruction was limited and did serve a military objective. Just like Emma LeConte, Burge and others had a Union officer tasked with protecting them from personal harm. Atrocities did occur, but Sherman's army generally acted with discipline and was willing to police itself and bring justice upon soldiers who violated its moral code. Confiscation of property and personal humiliation was typically targeted at the southern elite, who Union soldiers not only considered to be more appropriate military targets than other Southerners, but also the oppressors that brought about secession in the first place, and seemingly impressed it upon poor whites who appeared to be every bit as dependent on the wealthy as the slaves they owned. Unconditional fear and hatred extended far beyond the southern women who encountered Sherman's men, extending to the far reaches of the South. But those same men also displayed compassion and charity when they deemed it appropriate to do so.

These first hand accounts document how Sherman's army, under orders, destroyed civilian property. In some cases, Union soldiers went beyond the scope of their duties and chose to instill fear in or to humiliate the civilians they encountered for personal satisfaction. They also reveal the sense of entitlement felt by elite members of southern society. Sherman's March resulted in widespread destruction and anguish, but based on these accounts it would appear that much of this destruction was directed at those who prospered from the suffering of others.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 136.

Bibliography

- Ash, Stephen V. *When the Yankees Came: Conflict & Chaos in the Occupied South, 1861-1865*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995.
- Frank, Lisa Tendrich. "Bedrooms as Battlefields: The Role of Gender Politics in Sherman's March." In *Occupied Women*, edited by LeeAnn Whites and Alecia P. Long, 33-48. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009.
- Glatthaar, Joseph T. *The March to the Sea and Beyond: Sherman's Troops in the Savannah and Carolinas Campaigns*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995.
- Grimsley, Mark. *The Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy Toward Southern Civilians 1861-1865*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Harwell, Richard. *The Journal of Kate Cumming: A Confederate Nurse 1862-1865*. Savannah: The Beehive Press, 1975.
- Patrick, Jeffrey L., and Robert Willey. "'We have surely done a big work': The Diary of a Hoosier Soldier on Sherman's 'March to the Sea.'" *Indiana Magazine of History* 94, no. 3 (1998): 214-39. *JSTOR*.
- Robertson, James I. "The Diary of Dolly Lunt Burge." *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (1961): 367-84. *JSTOR*.
- Schenck Miers, Earl, ed. *When the World Ended: The Diary of Emma LeConte*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987.