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Retaliation with restraint: Destruction of private property in the 1864 Shenandoah Valley Campaign

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Retaliation with Restraint:
Destruction of Private Property in the 1864 Shenandoah Valley Campaign
Jeannie Cummings Harding

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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To Mark and the three amazing Harding boys God has blessed us with: Seth, Jonathan, and Andrew. Each of you encouraged me to follow my passion, and I pray you have the opportunity to do the same. Also to my Mama, who has never once failed to be there for me.

We love because He first loved us. 1 John 4:19

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Abstract

The Second Shenandoah Valley Campaign in 1864 created new challenges for commanders, soldiers, and civilians on both sides. Pressure on General Grant and President Lincoln to end the war quickly precipitated an increase in the use and severity of hard war policies in the South. Meanwhile, Confederate Lieutenant General Jubal Early worked against his foe, implementing hard war in southern Pennsylvania in a desperate attempt to maintain his supply base in the Shenandoah Valley. Soldiers and civilians found themselves caught in the middle of an increasing cycle of destruction that they seemed to find equally demoralizing.

Three towns suffered significant damage resulting from hard war tactics between June and October 1864: Lexington and Dayton, Virginia, and Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. Together, raids in these three locales reveal the changing nature of the war in regard to private property and the effect new policies had on soldier and civilian morale. In each town that summer and fall of 1864, commanders and enlisted men exercised restraint in the midst of destruction. Often, men from both sides had been involved in or witnessed more than one of these raids, contributing to the effectiveness of these incidents as case studies.

To say that the level of destruction steadily increased from June to October would be an oversimplification. Yet the destruction did seem to become less discriminate and more widespread as the campaign progressed. Concurrently, the level of distress soldiers and civilians expressed also increased with each incident, prompting soldiers to go to new lengths in circumventing orders to spare private property. Each instance was sparked by

some sentiment of retaliation, and causal relationships existed among all three. In every instance, without fail, the men and civilians caught in the middle expressed profound regret. Both sides decided that hard war had limits.

Introduction

By the time the Second Shenandoah Valley Campaign began in May 1864, the American Civil War had taken a drastic turn. President Abraham Lincoln faced a contentious re-election campaign, and though Union troops in the West had scored important strategic victories on the battlefield, General Robert E. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia managed to persevere in the East. Confederate troops continued to protect their capital in Richmond and threatened Washington, DC in a series of raids based out of the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. Weary of the fighting that had pervaded his entire term as president, Lincoln wanted and *needed* a decisive victory in the East to win the war—and the 1864 presidential election. Poor leadership and disappointing generals had plagued the Union Army in the East, and by the spring of 1864, Lincoln appointed a bold general with a winning record in the West and a reputation for ruthless tactics: Ulysses S. Grant.

Grant's promotion signaled a shift in Union war policy. Historian Mark Grimsley has identified a change from the early policy of "conciliation" to one of "hard war." Where conciliation had initially intended to facilitate the Confederacy's reentry into the United States, the new hard war policy targeted supplies and resources—even those belonging to civilians—in an attempt to erode resistance and destroy the ability to wage war. Grimsley writes of the Union policy, "The hard hand of war descended most heavily on public property and the property of private persons who supported the Confederacy, especially the wealthy."¹ Grimsley's definition encompasses "operations

¹ Mark Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy Toward Southern Civilians, 1861-1865* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 4.

aimed at the destruction of enemy economic resources (whether publicly or privately owned), forced evacuations, or confiscation of property without recompense” with “one common element: the erosion of the enemy’s will to resist by deliberately or concomitantly subjecting the civilian population to the pressures of war.”²

Grant articulated this strategic shift to Lincoln in the spring of 1864, just before the Spring Campaign opened. Grant explained that Union troops should advance on Confederate lines in order to “compel the enemy to keep detachments to hold them back, or else lay his own territory open to invasion.” Lincoln understood and replied, “Oh, yes! I see that. As we say out West, if a man can’t skin he must hold a leg while somebody else does.”³ Yet, despite the increased level of destruction that hard war brought, both sides exercised a level of restraint and placed limits on the amount of destruction. In some cases, the limits were geographic, and in other instances, particular homes and buildings were either targeted or spared by commanding officers. Destruction was far from universal even under this new “hard war.”

Three small towns serve as case studies for hard war in the 1864 Valley Campaign: Lexington and Dayton, Virginia and Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. All three became targets of enemy troops, and all were objects of retaliation. These towns provide a particularly interesting study because of their geographic and chronological proximity—they lie within two hundred miles of each other, and all experienced the destruction of large amounts of civilian property between June and October 1864. In

² Grimsley, 5.

³ *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant* (1885; repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 282.

addition, many officers and enlisted men from both armies were involved in at least two of the three events or became witnesses immediately after the fact.

These three case studies taken together reveal that enlisted men were generally no more comfortable carrying out the destruction by October 1864 than they had been in June, even though the orders to destroy became more severe as time went on. Union and Confederate soldiers alike struggled with the ambivalence of bringing the war “home” to enemy civilians while maintaining their Victorian values. Soldiers on both sides wanted to end the war quickly, yet their commanders’ new policies of increased destruction often seemed at odds with their own standards of “civilized” warfare. The fact that these soldiers had left behind wives, daughters, mothers, and sisters who were themselves vulnerable to invading armies further complicated their thoughts and feelings about the burnings. Many soldiers on the front line of destruction struggled to carry out such orders when they came face to face with women who looked and sounded like the women they had left behind. Reports of men on both sides who disobeyed orders and fabricated excuses not to destroy private property abounded.

The issues of destruction and soldierly duty are discussed not only in Grimsley’s work, but also in Charles Royster’s *The Destructive War*, which looks at the increased level of destruction inaugurated by the war. Royster describes the American Civil War as the first truly modern war and argues that Americans accepted and *expected* a greater level of destruction in this war than they had in previous conflicts. Grimsley, on the other hand, clearly defines the concept of “hard war” as the regulated, limited destruction of private property—as opposed to “total war” which he defines as indiscriminate destruction.

While Royster and Grimsley deal with the big picture, other works focus on either soldiers or civilians exclusively. Gerald Linderman's *Embattled Courage* describes how the character of the war changed for combat soldiers, especially Union soldiers, in the last two years of the war, with the rising death toll and the increased destruction of private property. Similarly, Reid Mitchell's examination of the northern soldier in *The Vacant Chair* demonstrates how physical distance from family and community psychologically distanced Union soldiers from their hometown values and allowed them to confront civilians in ways that were previously unacceptable. Both works demonstrate how the increasing level of death and destruction toward the end of the war exerted stress on soldiers' Victorian values and how the soldiers eventually adopted a new set of mores to deal with the orders they received to destroy private property and to turn women and children out of their homes.

From the civilian perspective, *Seasons of War* by Daniel E. Sutherland provides an up-close examination of one community, Culpeper County, Virginia, as it continually changed hands between the Union and Confederate armies. Sutherland argues that occupation eroded southern nationalism and that total war—he differs from Grimsley over the degree of destruction—was effective in ultimately wearing down southern resistance. Megan Kate Nelson contributed to the field recently with *Ruin Nation*, published in 2012. While Nelson largely deals with historical memory and the ways in which the war's ruins were memorialized or repurposed, she also examines the destruction of civilian homes in the latter stages of the war and how the war's new technology increased the capacity for destruction, arguing that Americans became increasingly desensitized to destruction as it became more frequent. The important

question that remains is to what extent northern occupation and destruction dissolved southerners' will to continue fighting.

Military histories of the 1864 Valley Campaign are essential to understanding the context in which the burnings occurred. Richard R. Duncan's *Lee's Endangered Left* covers the campaign in depth, focusing on the last major push in western Virginia and the larger campaign in which all of the 1864 burnings transpired. Duncan describes the actions by the commanders on both sides and sheds light on their military objectives and how the towns that were damaged figured into the broader goals of the armies. William G. Thomas' essay "Nothing Ought to Astonish Us," describes the changing policy on civilian property throughout the Valley Campaign. He focuses on the impact of destruction on the southern homefront, though he does explore the connections between events in Lexington and Chambersburg. Thomas concludes with Sheridan's raid but ignores the burning of Dayton. The short length of the essay precludes an in-depth examination of the burnings, but it does provide a good starting point for viewing the burnings as a sequence of related events, and it demonstrates the increasing scale of destruction.

In-depth studies of the destruction in Lexington, Chambersburg, and Dayton lack scholarly research and are limited to local histories written by amateur historians, often at the behest of county historical societies. While they are rich in narrative and bibliographic information, they are often overly patriotic in tone, celebrating their towns' history and heritage, as well as their rebirth after destruction. The major work that deals with Lexington is Robert J. Driver, Jr.'s *Lexington and Rockbridge County in the Civil War*. Driver's work provides invaluable details regarding the occupation and destruction

in the Lexington area and in greater depth than the broader scholarly works do. Likewise, Chambersburg's destruction is detailed in two locally-published works, *Southern Revenge!* by Ted Alexander and *Confederate Retaliation*, written by Fritz Haselberger. Like Driver's work, these two books offer valuable bibliographic resources as well as details on precisely which properties were destroyed, information that is difficult to locate in other places. Rockingham County native John L. Heatwole penned *The Burning*, which tells not only the story of Dayton's burning in October 1864, but also that of the surrounding area in the larger campaign that Union General Philip Sheridan conducted as part of the Union's new hard war policy. Like his counterparts in Chambersburg and Lexington, Heatwole unearths important local sources, including many oral histories he collected himself. However, his research requires careful consideration, as it relies heavily on oral tradition that bears a striking resemblance to folklore, and he neglected some important sources that tell the full story of the burning. Simply put, the local histories cannot be taken at face value, but they also cannot be overlooked entirely.

Civilian property and the question of how each army should deal with it became an increasingly divisive issue as the Civil War dragged on. Historians have addressed the burnings of 1864 from a variety of angles, but there is still a major gap in the research in that it fails to address these three incidents holistically, from the soldiers' and civilians' perspectives. Fitting together the various pieces of this puzzle will yield a greater understanding of how decisions to destroy private property were made and how the destruction impacted the course of the war. Important questions emerge from taking these three towns together as a case study: Why were these three towns singled out and

why at this particular time? What were the limits of destruction and why were there limits? How did the burnings affect civilian morale? How did the soldiers involved feel about the orders to destroy property? These questions hold significance beyond the summer of 1864. Shortly after the destruction in Dayton in October, Union General Sheridan completed a widespread hard war policy in the Shenandoah Valley, followed by General Sherman's March to the Sea later that year in Georgia and South Carolina, which many credit with hastening the war's end.

Beginning with the Battle of New Market in May 1864 and concluding with the Battle of Cedar Creek in October 1864, the Second Valley Campaign was fought not only on the battlefield but also on the farms and in the small towns of Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. In the cases of Lexington, Chambersburg, and Dayton, commanders decided to order destruction as a form of retaliation against the enemy. And in each case, common soldiers and officers exercised restraint in the destruction, whether they believed the burning was necessary or not. A cycle of retaliation with restraint ensued.

Chapter 1: Hunter's Raid on Lexington

In May 1864, the war in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley entered a new phase. In the first Valley Campaign of 1862, the region became a battleground because of its proximity to both Washington and Richmond and because the mountains that ran along its borders provided a shield for Confederate General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson to harass Union troops intent on capturing Richmond. Two years later, Union troops refocused their attention on the Valley and went farther south in the region than they ever had before. The Valley once again occupied a strategic position, but this time, agricultural production, not geographic location, was the objective. The Valley earned its nickname the "Breadbasket of the Confederacy" for the large quantities of grain it provided for southern soldiers and civilians alike, and Union commanders showed a new determination to prevent the region from continuing to feed the enemy by controlling or destroying its supplies and transportation lines.

The second Valley Campaign opened on May 15, 1864 at the Battle of New Market. Cadets from Virginia Military Institute marched eighty-one miles from Lexington north to New Market to act as reserves for Confederate General John C. Breckinridge as his men battled Union General Franz Sigel along the Great Valley Road. This was Sigel's second round in the Shenandoah Valley; he was part of the Union force that Jackson had defeated in the 1862 Valley Campaign. Many considered Sigel inept, but his German background endeared him to Union soldiers of German descent, and President Lincoln gave him command of the new Department of West Virginia.

After several hours of fighting, Sigel's troops were pushed back to the northern edge of the Valley. The two hundred fifty-seven cadets who fought in the battle served admirably by all accounts under Commandant of Cadets, Lieutenant Colonel Scott Shipp. Shipp's official report elaborated, "The Cadets did their duty, as the long list of casualties will attest. . . . Wet, hungry. . . they bore their hardships with that uncomplaining resignation which characterizes the true soldier."⁴ The cadets counted ten dead and fifty-seven wounded among their unit at the conclusion of the battle and returned to the Institute in Lexington as their Confederate comrades headed east to join Confederate General Robert E. Lee's army. Meanwhile, Sigel withdrew north near Cedar Creek and was quickly replaced by Union General David Hunter. Days after Sigel's embarrassing rout at New Market, a frustrated Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant wrote to Major General Henry Halleck, "By all means I would say appoint General Hunter, or anyone else, to the command of West Virginia."⁵ Hunter had already made a name for himself in the war and was dubbed "Black Dave" for his abolitionist views. In 1862, Hunter had issued "General Order No. 11," ordering the emancipation of slaves in three Confederate states; in response, Confederate President Jefferson Davis officially branded Hunter an outlaw and authorized his execution if captured.⁶ Hunter's reputation preceded him in the Shenandoah Valley.

⁴ S. Shipp to Maj. Gen. F. H. Smith, July 4, 1864, U.S. War Department, *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, vol. 37, pt. I: 91. Cited hereafter as OR; unless otherwise specified, all OR documents are located in Series I.

⁵ Grant to Halleck, May 19, 1864, OR, 37, pt. I: 492.

⁶ Davis' order regarding Hunter can be found in "General Orders, No. 60," August 21, 1862, OR, Series III, vol. 5: 712.

Hunter reorganized Sigel's troops and began marching south. Grant authorized the troops to "liv[e] on the country,"⁷ to which Hunter replied, "I shall depend entirely on the country."⁸ However, Hunter himself revealed a measure of restraint in General Order No. 29, which he handed down immediately following his promotion and just before his army began their march south:

Commanders will be held strictly responsible that their commands are amply supplied from the country. Cattle, sheep, and hogs, and if necessary horses and mules, must be taken and slaughtered. These supplies will be seized under the direction of officers duly authorized, and upon a system which will hereafter be regulated. No straggling or pillaging will be allowed. . . . They [commanders] will see that in passing through a country in this way, depending upon it for forage and supplies, great additional vigilance is required on the part of every officer in command of men for the strict enforcement of discipline.⁹

Charles H. Lynch of the 18th Connecticut indicated that Hunter was true to his word:

Owing to our rations running very low some of the boys took the liberty to go foraging, going without a permit from the General's headquarters. They were rounded up by cavalry scouts, placed under arrest, taken to headquarters, where they received a severe reprimand from General Hunter. All were punished.

The soldiers did not understand the reason behind Hunter's strict orders not to seek out their own food when rations were low. Lynch elaborated, "We can stand most anything but hunger. It did seem very strange to us that we could not forage in the enemy's country. We are seventy miles from our base of supplies, which must be brought to us in wagons under a strong guard."¹⁰ Hunter issued the orders to control his troops rather than

⁷ Grant to Halleck, May 25, 1864, OR, 37, pt. I: 536.

⁸ Hunter to Halleck, May 28, 1864, OR, 37, pt. I: 548.

⁹ General Order No. 29, May 22, 1864, OR 37, pt. I: 518.

¹⁰ *The Civil War Diary, 1862-1865, of Charles H. Lynch, 18th Conn. Vol's*, Alexander Street, <http://solomon.cwld.alexanderstreet.com/cgi-in/asp/philo/cwld/documentidx.pl?sourceid=S1631> (accessed October 7, 2012).

to protect private property; he proved quick to punish civilians, as he burned houses from which guerrillas fired on Union troops.¹¹

As he moved south, Hunter defeated a small Confederate force at the Battle of Piedmont on June 5. The following day, Grant ordered Hunter to move on Lynchburg to destroy the Virginia Central Railroad, suggesting “it would be of great value to us to get possession of Lynchburg for a single day,” but also adding that Confederate resistance would likely render that goal impossible.¹² Lynchburg served as a major supply base for the Confederacy, and its intricate transportation network of canals, rivers, and railroads made it an inviting target for the Union and the object of fierce protection by the Confederacy.

On the way to Lynchburg, Hunter arrived in Staunton, in the southern Shenandoah Valley. The war had come within thirty miles of the city, but Union troops had never entered the city itself; Staunton was one of several Virginia towns that would see direct action for the first time during Hunter’s Raid. In Staunton, Hunter discovered “large quantities of commissary and ordnance stores, which were destroyed or distributed among the troops. All the railroad bridges and depots, and public workshops and factories in the town and vicinity, were also destroyed.”¹³ In many ways, events in Staunton provided the blueprint for future raids by Hunter’s men. They destroyed nearly all public property and left private property largely untouched.

¹¹ Frank Smith Reader Diary, May 26, 1864, Hunter’s Raid File. Top government and military authorities in the United States sanctioned the destruction of homes harboring guerrillas, and many Union generals, including Ulysses S. Grant, practiced this form of punishment. Hunter’s actions in this regard were not out of the ordinary.

¹² Grant to Hunter, June 6, 1864, OR, 37, pt. I: 598.

¹³ Hunter, June 8, 1864, OR, 37, pt. I: 95.

Pressing on toward Lynchburg, Hunter pursued Confederate troops under Generals John McCausland and William L. “Mudwall” Jackson as they retreated south. The two armies encountered each other again on June 11, just outside Lexington. McCausland had strong ties to Lexington’s Virginia Military Institute: he graduated first in the Class of 1857, served as assistant professor of math and tactics and, as a faculty member, had escorted cadets to John Brown’s 1859 execution in Charles Town.¹⁴ McCausland’s orders that day did not include defending the town. Instead, he was ordered to perform a delaying action in Lexington, buying time for General Jubal Early to reinforce the more valuable city of Lynchburg and keep it out of Union hands.

In his official report, Hunter expressed contempt for McCausland’s tactics, describing his concealment of artillery inside the town as an “unsoldierly and inhuman attempt. . . to defend an indefensible position against an overwhelming force by screening himself behind the private dwellings of women and children.” McCausland, in fact, may have intentionally put the townspeople in harm’s way, drawing Union artillery fire on civilians to provoke outrage in the southern press, and at least one Lexington civilian agreed with Hunter’s assessment. Cornelia Peake McDonald, a Winchester soldier’s wife who took refuge in Lexington, commented on the event in her memoirs: “June 11th, the approach of the enemy was announced. Everybody connected with the army prepared to fly. Gen. Smith departed with the corps of cadets, and Gen. McCausland after burning the bridge that led to the town, made good his retreat, leaving the terror-stricken people to

¹⁴ Virginia Military Institute’s website contains valuable information on the school’s Civil War history. For a brief biographical sketch of McCausland, see Virginia Military Institute, “VMI’s Civil War Generals,” <http://www.vmi.edu/archives.aspx?id=5627> (accessed January 18, 2013).

their fears, and to the tender mercies of the enemy.”¹⁵ Hunter went on to explain that this action, along with the presence of Confederate sharpshooters in the cliffs and nearby buildings “might have brought justifiable destruction upon the whole town, but as this was not rendered imperative by any military necessity, I preferred to spare private property and an unarmed population.”¹⁶

The Union Army may not have considered the small town of Lexington a strategic target of any significance, but the Army of West Virginia had a bone to pick with one of its educational institutions. Virginia Military Institute had long been a thorn in the Union’s side, and though the Institute’s cadets played only a small role in the New Market debacle, the school had served as a breeding ground for secession and Confederate indoctrination, not to mention the fact that “Stonewall” Jackson had famously taught there prior to the war. Both sides identified the school as a beacon of southern values; the Battle of New Market had merely raised the stakes. Reporting on the battle in May, the *Lynchburg Virginian* lauded the cadets’ role in the victory and the Institute in general: “Well may Virginians point to it as one of the most sightly and enduring monuments of her splendid magnificence, to be cherished and adorned in all future time. There has been scarcely a field won by Southern valor and prowess where her graduates have not led [troops] . . . and but few that have not been wet with their blood.”¹⁷ The state of Virginia owned VMI and was in open rebellion against the United States government, yet Hunter did not begin the task of destroying it until the day after his troops arrived in Lexington.

¹⁵ Cornelia McDonald, *A Diary with Reminiscences of the War and a Refugee Life in the Shenandoah Valley, 1860-1865* (Nashville: Cullom and Ghertner, 1934), 202-203.

¹⁶ Hunter, August 8, 1864, OR, 37, pt. I: 96.

¹⁷ “The Virginia Military Institute,” *Lynchburg Virginian*, May 23, 1864.

As townspeople received word of Hunter's approach and began hearing artillery and small arms fire, they instinctively knew that their beloved Institute would not likely survive the raid intact. Diarist Margaret Junkin Preston left behind one of the most detailed and insightful accounts of Hunter's Raid, and she held a unique position in Lexington society and history. Her father, Reverend George Junkin, had served as president of Washington College in Lexington but had retired amid controversy over his unionist views and left the state. Preston's husband, John Thomas Lewis Preston, was one of VMI's founders, and her late sister Eleanor was the first wife of then VMI professor "Stonewall" Jackson.¹⁸ As early as June 7, Preston recorded, "Mr. P. [her husband] is as busy as he can be, getting things at the V. M. I. moved away. The library has been carried to [Washington] College. As the Institute is Government property, they will most likely burn it; that, at all events, is what we apprehend."¹⁹ A later report to the Board of Trustees of Washington College confirmed that

a considerable number of pieces of apparatus from the V. M. Institute had been deposited [in one of the college's laboratories] for safe keeping, under the belief, that if any place would escape the depredations of an invading foe, it would be a purely scientific establishment, which could have but little bearing upon the war, either directly or indirectly.²⁰

The fact that items from VMI were relocated to the adjacent Washington College indicates that residents also believed the school would be spared destruction.

The townspeople's predictions proved eerily accurate. Though Washington College did not escape vandalism entirely, it was spared the torch while VMI was not.

¹⁸ For a brief biographical sketch of Reverend Junkin, see the Washington and Lee University website at <http://www.wlu.edu/x55751.xml> (accessed October 27, 2012).

¹⁹ Margaret Junkin Preston, June 7, 1864, VMI Archives, <http://www.vmi.edu/archives.aspx?id=3949> (accessed October 27, 2012).

²⁰ Report of Faculty, August 8, 1864, W&L Trustees Papers.

Union soldiers delighted in the destruction of the Institute, which, to them, represented Confederate values and southern aristocracy. Colonel David Hunter Strother of the 3rd West Virginia Cavalry, first cousin to General David Hunter and the general's chief of staff, concurred with the prevailing northern view. Strother was popularly known as "Porte Crayon" or "Pencil Carrier," the pen name he used as an artist for *Harper's Weekly* and various other publications before the war. He was born in western Virginia but spent much of his adult life outside the South, and his unionist views eventually led him to join the Union Army.²¹ Strother's diary entry for June 12 reveals the soldiers' attitudes:

The General asked my opinion in regard to the destruction of the Institute. I told him I looked upon it as a most dangerous establishment where treason was systematically taught. That I believed the States Rights conspirators had with subtlety and forethought established and encouraged the school for the express purpose of educating the youth of the country into such opinions as would render them ready and efficient tools wherewith to overthrow the government of the country when the hour and opportunity arrived. . . . The catalogue of the Institute itself showed what a list of capable military officers had been there raised up against the government of the country. This was the great paramount reason for its destruction by fire. There were military reasons besides. The professors and cadets had taken the field against government troops, as an organized corps.²²

Strother's justification for burning VMI included both its secessionist reputation as well as a desire to retaliate against the school for its participation in the Battle of New Market.

One Pennsylvania soldier expressed a twinge of regret, writing home, "There was a military school here but we have burnt all the buildings. It was a pitty [sic] to do it but I

²¹ *A Virginia Yankee in the Civil War: The Diaries of David Hunter Strother*, ed. Cecil D. Eby, Jr. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), xix-xx.

²² Strother, 254-255.

suppose it could not be helpt [sic].”²³ Other accounts of the raid indicate that the burning of the Institute was a foregone conclusion. The day before VMI was burned, Frank Smith Reader of the West Virginia 5th Cavalry wrote simply, “At this place is the Va. Mil. Institute which we will burn.”²⁴ William H. Beach of the First New York Cavalry echoed his comrades’ thoughts:

The young cadets of the Lexington Military Institute had borne a part in the battle of New Market. From a professorship in this Institute Stonewall Jackson had entered the Confederate service. Hunter ordered the Institute to be burned. He stood looking at the burning building, saying as he rubbed his hands and chuckled with delight, “Doesn’t that burn beautifully?” The burning of this Institute was a legitimate act of war. It had been a school for the training of soldiers.²⁵

Strother, always claiming to be at the center of the action, described the scene: “The Institute burnt out about two P.M. and the arsenal blew up with a smart explosion. The General seemed to enjoy this scene and turning to me expressed his great satisfaction at having me with him.”²⁶

The soldiers involved in the burning felt compelled to justify the destruction of the Institute and did not take for granted that the general public would necessarily view it in the same light. In Hunter’s official report, though, he offered no justification, reporting plainly, “On the 12th I also burned the Virginia Military Institute and all the buildings connected with it.”²⁷ At least one Union soldier disagreed with the destruction of VMI: Colonel Rutherford B. Hayes. Hayes served in General George Crook’s division under Hunter, and the future president’s wartime diaries and letters often

²³ Sidney Marlin Letter, June 14, 1864, VMI Archives.

²⁴ Reader Diary, June 12, 1864.

²⁵ William H. Beach, *The First New York (Lincoln) Cavalry* (New York: The Lincoln Cavalry Association, 1902), 370-371.

²⁶ Strother, 256.

²⁷ Hunter, August 8, 1864, OR, 37, pt. I: 97.

reflected criticism of Hunter. About the burning of the Institute, Hayes wrote in his diary, “This does not suit many of us. General Crook, I know, disapproves.”²⁸

Many of the soldiers looted and vandalized the Institute before applying the torch. Reader admitted, “We got all kinds of trophies in the academy.”²⁹ The next day he wrote, “There are some of the most extensive libraries here that I ever saw. I have procured some very good works. The cadets who attended the Military Academy here lived in style.”³⁰ Ohio artilleryman J. O. Humphreys noted wryly,

Both the Institute and the College were well rummaged by the boys, and the clothing of the cadets and the libraries of the two institutions received much attention. Indeed it is doubtful if ever an army was so devoted to literature as was our Corps. A quantity of ordnance and the Q. M. stores were found at the Institute which were burned with the buildings.³¹

Strother witnessed much of the same activity; when the order to burn the building was carried out, “the plunderers came running out, their arms full of spoils. One fellow had a stuffed gannet from the museum of natural history; others had the high-topped hats of cadet officers, and most of them were loaded with the most useless and impracticable articles.”³² Strother insisted that he was offered “some beautifully illustrated volumes of natural history,” but he “felt averse to taking anything and left them at Professor Smith’s.” His “only spoil” was a VMI button “and a pair of gilt epaulettes which some of the clerks had picked up and handed” him.³³ Strother seemed compelled to justify both

²⁸ *Diary and Letters of Rutherford Birchard Hayes, Nineteenth President of the United States, Volume II*, ed. Charles Richard Williams (1922; repr., New York: Kraus Reprint, 1971), 473. This entry was written on June 12, 1864.

²⁹ Reader Diary, June 11, 1864.

³⁰ Reader Diary, June 12, 1864.

³¹ J. O. Humphreys Diary, Part 1, June 12, 1864, VMI Archives.

³² Strother, 255.

³³ Strother, 256.

the looting and burning of the Institute, perhaps because he was a native son of the state he was now raiding.

Rummaging and looting were not confined to enlisted men. Lieutenant John Rodgers Meigs was only twenty-three when he rode into Lexington with Hunter's men. The son of Union Quartermaster General Montgomery C. Meigs had graduated first in the Class of 1863 from West Point. Meigs figured prominently in the raid, and, ironically, his death in October 1864 in Dayton, Virginia—a mere sixty miles from Lexington—touched off yet another round of burning in the Shenandoah Valley. Meigs personally removed some of the school's mathematical instruments and left a note in the Dialectic Literary Society's record book:

Lexington, June 12, 1864

The next meeting of the Di was probably interfered with by the threatening advance of the Yankees under Siegel [sic], who marched up the Valley of Virginia against them. The cadets and other southern forces defeated Siegel at New Market: but three weeks afterwards, in a battle at Piedmont, near Weyer's Cave, Gen. Hunter, Siegel's successor, utterly routed their force, and took 1,000 prisoners. At this moment, the Virginia military institute is a mass of flames.

John R. Meigs³⁴

In an incident reminiscent of traditional college pranks among rival schools, Meigs wanted a trophy from the southern military academy to send back to his alma mater in the North. He helped capture VMI's beloved statue of George Washington, a bronze copy of the famous original by Jean Antoine Houdon. Strother claimed to have aided Meigs in his escapade:

³⁴ Francis H. Smith, July 15, 1864, "Superintendent's Report," VMI Archives. Unfortunately, the original record book for the society did not survive into the twentieth century.

I suggested to the General that the bronze statue of Washington in front of the Institute should be sent to Wheeling by the train as a trophy for West Virginia. Meigs, who undertook the boxing and moving of it, insisted that it should go to West Point, and as I was indifferent as to what was its destination I consented readily. The fire had not injured the statue in the least, and as I looked at the dignified and noble countenance I felt indignant that this effigy should be left to adorn a country whose inhabitants were striving to destroy a government which he founded.³⁵

Not all northerners felt that Virginia was unfit to own the Washington statue. A Milwaukee newspaper compared the theft unfavorably to Napoleon's practice of stealing artwork from conquered nations. The editorial—gleefully reprinted the next day in the *Lynchburg Virginian*—called it “an act of vandalism without earthly excuse—it is a theft that nothing can palliate—disgraceful to the age, and doubly so to the country that will suffer such a sacrilege to go unwhipped of justice.” The scathing article concluded, “In the world's history it is without a parallel, and our hope is that it may remain so.”³⁶ The statue even made an appearance in the Official Records; Hunter's Special Order No. 15 noted that

Capt. A. V. Barringer, chief quartermaster, Department of West Virginia, will forward to Col. A. H. Bowman, superintendent of the Military Academy, West Point, N. Y., the bronze statue of General George Washington, captured at the Virginia Military Institute at Lexington, Va., to be placed in the grounds at the Military Academy, West Point, N. Y.³⁷

Despite this effort, the founding father's likeness ended up in Wheeling, West Virginia, as a gift to the new state's governor, and Strother himself orchestrated the statue's return to the Institute in 1866, while serving as Virginia's adjutant

³⁵ Strother, 256-257.

³⁶ *Daily Milwaukee News*, July 22, 1864, <http://access.newspaperarchive.com/Viewer.aspx?img=119992365&firstvisit=true&src=search¤tResult=0¤tPage=0&fpo=False> (accessed January 18, 2013).

³⁷ Hunter, June 15, 8164, OR, 37, pt. I: 640.

general.³⁸ The self-proclaimed “Virginia Yankee” demonstrated some ambivalence about his role in the raid.

Though Reader insisted, “We have destroyed all public property that we can get at,”³⁹ there was one noteworthy exception. Washington College stood less than a mile from VMI, but the school escaped the flames that engulfed its neighbor. Beach recalled that “Hunter proposed also to burn Washington College that had been endowed by President Washington. But so many of his officers protested so vigorously that it was spared.”⁴⁰ The college escaped the flames, but it did not escape the attention of the plunderers and pillagers. In an August 1864 report to the Board of Trustees, clerk J. L. Campbell detailed the destruction:

All closed doors were broken open, window-glafs [sic] & sash were smashed to pieces, and preparations were made for burning the buildings, which is said to have been prevented by the timely intervention of Capt. D. E. Moore, a member of your Board. . . . no sooner had the enemy made their appearance on the College grounds, than the doors of the Laboratory were broken open, and every article it contained either broken to pieces or carried off. . . . The whole presents a scene of desolation and destruction which could not easily be surpafsed [sic]. . . . The libraries of the College and the literary Societies, were broken open, and about half the books carried off, and many of those left behind were seriously mutilated and defaced. The furniture of the society halls was taken out and distributed amongst the negroes of the town.

Campbell also lamented, “There is no hope of recovering any thing like the whole of the lost volumes,” but several books eventually made their way back to the college after the war, some of them many decades later.⁴¹

³⁸ Strother, 257n .

³⁹ Reader Diary, June 13, 1864.

⁴⁰ Beach, 371.

⁴¹ Report of Faculty, August 8, 1864, W&L Trustees Papers.

Strother saved the school from complete destruction, writing, “A trustee of Washington College called to explain that the soldiers were sacking the building and desired a guard to protect it. I ordered it immediately and explained to him why we were disposed to treat his college in a different manner from the Institute.” The college survived because of its connection to George Washington as well as its identification as a civilian educational institution. The soldiers in this instance restrained their commander from ordering its burning. Yet Strother reported that the soldiers were “pelting the statue of the father of their country on the cupola, supposing it to represent Jefferson Davis.”⁴² Washington statues received a great deal of attention in Lexington that June day.

Hunter spared most of the private homes in Lexington, but there was one home that he did not ignore. John Letcher lived in Lexington, between VMI and Washington College. Letcher had served as Virginia’s governor from 1860-1864 and had left office by the time of Hunter’s Raid. Fearing capture, Letcher escaped the town just ahead of the Union Army, leaving his family behind. According to Strother, “An officer brought to General Hunter a proclamation issued by ex-Governor Letcher inciting the people to arise and wage a guerilla warfare upon the vandal hordes of Yankee invaders. After issuing this foolish and abusive paper, the ex-Governor himself took to his heels.”⁴³ Hunter gave orders to burn Letcher’s home in retaliation for the alleged guerilla proclamation. The destruction of the Letcher home created more controversy than any other incident in Hunter’s Raid and elicited discussion of both its legality and appropriateness from Union soldiers and southern civilians alike.

⁴² Strother, 256.

⁴³ Strother, 256.

The original letter from Letcher has never been recovered, but word of its existence spread throughout the Union Army in Lexington, though the supposed particulars of the letter varied from source to source. Beach wrote, “In a printing office at Lexington were found copies of a handbill issued and signed by Letcher, that had been posted through the country, calling on the people to ‘bushwhack’ Hunter’s men, murder them by shooting them from concealed places. This was not open warfare.”⁴⁴

Pennsylvania soldier Sidney Marlin heard about Letcher’s proclamation and wrote to his wife that the former governor “had left the town before we came in and had issued [sic] a proclamation for the people to harris [harass] us all they could. I believe that is the reason his buildings were burnt.”⁴⁵ A soldier in the 3rd West Virginia Cavalry elaborated on the prevailing rumor regarding the Letcher note, reporting the burning of Letcher’s home was “done by order of Genl. Hunter because of the finding of circulars calling on the people to poison an [sic] bushwhack Yankee invaders. The burning was done tho. [though] protested against by Genl. Averill & Genl. Crooks.”⁴⁶ Reader gave no explanation for the act, only commenting, “We burnt some fine buildings, among others the residence of Gov. Letcher.”⁴⁷ Humphreys also neglected to mention the handbill: “Drunken Rebel ex-Governor John Letcher’s house was also burned--a very appropriate and fitting way of doing things to such men.”⁴⁸ He failed to elaborate on why Letcher deserved the destruction of his home, but perhaps his governance of a state in the Confederacy justified the destruction in Humphreys’ mind.

⁴⁴ Beach, 371.

⁴⁵ Sidney Marlin Letter, June 14, 1864.

⁴⁶ William G. Watson Memoirs, VMI Archives.

⁴⁷ Reader Diary, June 12, 1864.

⁴⁸ Humphreys, June 12, 1864.

Whether the letter actually existed or not, Hunter mentioned it in his official report:

I found here [in Lexington] a violent and inflammatory proclamation from John Letcher, lately Governor of Virginia, inciting the population of the country to rise and wage a guerrilla warfare on my troops, and ascertaining that after having advised his fellow-citizens to this course the ex-Governor had himself ignominiously taken to flight, I ordered his property to be burned under my order, published May 24, against persons practicing or abetting such unlawful and uncivilized warfare.⁴⁹

Hayes predictably criticized the Letcher fire and offered an alternate explanation for Hunter's decision. He wrote to his wife,

General Hunter turned Mrs. Governor Letcher and daughters out of their home at Lexington and on ten minutes' notice burned the beautiful place in retaliation for some bushwhackers' burning out Governor Pierpont [of West Virginia.] And I am glad to say that General Crook's division officers and men were all disgusted with it.⁵⁰

Hayes and some of his comrades were clearly uncomfortable with the destruction of Letcher's private property, and they did not embrace Hunter's interpretation of hard war.

Letcher's home was the only private residence destroyed in the Lexington occupation. The former governor penned a letter on July 5 that was later published in the *Lynchburg Virginian*. Letcher explained his rapid retreat from Lexington: "The threats made by the Yankees, against me, for the past two years, satisfied me that they would destroy my house when they got to Lexington; but I always supposed they would allow the furniture and my family's clothing to be removed. In this, however, I was

⁴⁹ Hunter, August 8, 1864, OR, 37, pt. I: 97.

⁵⁰ Hayes, 478-479. Letter from Hayes to Mrs. Sophia Hayes, July 2, 1864.

disappointed.”⁵¹ Not surprisingly, Letcher’s piece in the newspaper made no mention of the alleged handbill.

The story about Mrs. Letcher receiving only a few moments’ notice to evacuate her home was well-documented by her neighbors and repeated in many Union diaries, adding color to the local lore of Hunter’s Raid, but each account varied in specifics. Governor Letcher detailed the incident in his letter: Hunter’s medical director, Dr. Patton, took a room in the Letcher home for the night on the evening of June 11. The next morning at breakfast, he told Letcher’s daughter “that it was the last meal she would take in the house.” When Mrs. Letcher approached Captain Towns about the possibility her house would be burned, he replied that Letcher, “being a private citizen, and the house being private property, burning it would be an inexcusable outrage.”

According to Letcher, Towns went to Hunter “and was directed by Hunter to assure [Mrs. Letcher] that the house would not be disturbed.” Letcher believed this was a deliberate ruse “to quiet her apprehensions and thus prevent anything from being removed.” Captain Berry arrived and “informed her that he was ordered by Hunter to fire the house.” When Mrs. Letcher asked to see the order, he said it was verbal and told her she had five minutes to evacuate. Berry refused her plea to rescue the family’s clothing, but as the fire was ignited, Letcher’s daughter attempted to run outside with an armful of clothes. Berry discovered her and “ran forward and fired the clothing in her arms.” Letcher’s elderly mother lived next door, and twice her house caught fire as the former governor’s outbuildings burned, but Captain Towns ordered his men to “carry water and extinguish the flames,” saving the widow’s home. Letcher also asserted that “Generals

⁵¹ *Lynchburg Virginian*, July 19, 1864.

Averill, Crook, Sullivan and Duffee⁵² denounced the whole proceeding as an outrage in violation of all the principles of civilized warfare, and stated that Hunter alone was responsible for these atrocities.”⁵³ Even Union cavalryman Beach questioned Hunter’s decision, though he had decried Letcher’s handbill. With the benefit of hindsight, Beach wrote, “Notwithstanding Letcher’s proclamation, the men of the regiment could not be made to look upon the burning of private residences as a proper act of war. Nothing was gained by it, as was proved when, a few weeks later, Early entered Maryland.”⁵⁴ The burning of the Letcher home challenged officers and enlisted men in the Union Army to reconsider how war should be waged in the Second Valley Campaign.

The Letcher home was the only privately-owned home razed by Union troops, but it was not the only residence destroyed in the raid. Two houses owned by VMI and occupied by professors were also burned, but these were considered public property. VMI professor Major William Henry Gilham resided in one of the Institute’s houses. The destruction of his home was seen as a legitimate act of war by Hunter since it was property of the state of Virginia, but the method of execution created a great deal of consternation, as demonstrated in three different accounts of the incident. Strother offered one version of events:

The General stopped at the house of Major Gilham, a professor of the Institute, and told the lady to get out her furniture as he intended to burn the house in the morning. She was eminently ladylike and was troubled, but yet firm. The house was a state building and it was fair to destroy it, yet it was her only home and it was hard to lose it, but she was a soldier’s

⁵² General William Averell’s name is commonly misspelled, as is General Alfred Duffie’s name. Duffie commanded Hunter’s First Cavalry. Although General George Crook, one of Hunter’s division commanders, is widely cited by contemporaries as opposing the destruction in Lexington, Crook left no evidence of his feelings on the matter; he neglected to mention it entirely in his postwar memoirs.

⁵³ *Lynchburg Virginian*, July 19, 1864.

⁵⁴ Beach, 371.

wife and a soldier's daughter so she set us out some good applejack, apologizing she had nothing better, and then went to move out her furniture to the lawn.⁵⁵

The next day, June 12, he reported that Mrs. Gilham's household items "were all piled on the parade ground and she sat in the midst, firm and ladylike." Strother claimed he procured from Captain Prendergast "two wagons and some orderlies to move" her things, and he "got a protection for her at the house she moved into to prevent soldiers from plundering her there." It bears noting that, according to Strother, Hunter gave Mrs. Gilham a great deal of notice that her residence would be burned, allowing her to remove and save personal items. The home of VMI professor and Confederate officer Colonel Thomas Williamson was also burned, and Strother noted that "Mrs. Williamson had got her things off" as well.⁵⁶

A very different version appeared in McDonald's reminiscences. She remembered that the professors' "distracted families amid the flames were rushing about trying to save some of their things, when they were forced to leave. . . officers standing by for the purpose. Not even their books and papers could they save, and scarcely any clothes." McDonald's version claimed that "Captain Prendergast knew Mrs. Gilham's brother," a colonel in the Union Army, "and for his sake granted her the particular favor of removing some of her household goods, which after she had succeeded in removing, she was compelled to stay by with her little boys to guard." McDonald confirmed that Gilham guarded her personal items but added that she sat up all night "to keep them from

⁵⁵ Strother, 253.

⁵⁶ Strother, 257.

being stolen by negroes and soldiers. . . and not a man dared to help her or offered to take her place,⁵⁷ denying any aid by Strother.

Yet a third variation exists on the Gilham story. Henry A. DuPont served under Crook as the Department of West Virginia's Chief of Artillery and was responsible for shelling VMI before the burning. DuPont recorded his memoirs on the war in the 1920s, often speaking very critically of Hunter. His version lies somewhere between Strother's and McDonald's:

With several other officers, I took part in saving some of the personal effects of Mrs. Gilham, wife of one of the professors of the Institute, by carrying out of her house with our own hands tables, sofas and other articles of furniture just before the building was set on fire. Mrs. Gilham, whose brother was an officer of the United States Regular Army, was in great distress and we were only too glad to assist her in every way in our power. Among those who helped I can only recall Captain William McKinley, afterwards President of the United States, and that popular and very good soldier, Captain Richard G. Prendergast of the First New York (Lincoln) Cavalry.⁵⁸

Clearly, major discrepancies exist among the various accounts. Strother described himself as the hero in the Gilham story, but other accounts do not mention his role in the event. DuPont wrote his book long after the war, but he corroborated Prendergrast's aid—and omitted the colorful story about Mrs. Gilham passing around the applejack. McDonald's diary, on the other hand, was edited after the war, and when she told the story of the Letcher house burning, she claimed to have been the only person in town who rushed to Mrs. Letcher's aid.⁵⁹ Lacking an account from Mrs. Gilham herself, the actual facts may never come to light. Yet the variations in the accounts reveal something

⁵⁷ McDonald, 206.

⁵⁸ Henry A. DuPont, *The Campaign of 1864 in the Valley of Virginia and the Expedition to Lynchburg*. (New York: National Americana Society, 1925), 68-69.

⁵⁹ McDonald, 207-208.

far more important than who came to the woman's aid and who did not. The common thread among all three indicates that civilians and soldiers alike were uneasy with the destruction of private property, even if the property were located in a public building. The story about Mrs. Gilham guarding her household goods is present in all three, whether she eventually received help relocating her possessions or not. McDonald, a southern woman and refugee herself, was understandably sympathetic and may have seen something of her own situation in that of Gilham's, but two Union officers, Strother and DuPont also revealed sympathy for the displaced woman. Whether or not they came to her aid, both men claimed to have been distressed by her displacement and were eager to help. They were clearly not comfortable with the situation and tried to exonerate themselves from the act of destroying her residence by claiming they had rescued her in some way. Both men distanced themselves from Hunter and his actions—DuPont explicitly and Strother implicitly.

Unlike the two professors' residences, the home of the Institute's superintendent Francis H. Smith narrowly escaped the torch. Strother's diary reported only that Hunter's staff—Strother included—set up headquarters in Smith's house, also the property of VMI, and he supposed that Hunter spared the house because “the roof which has sheltered us, and the house where we have been entertained should be saved, whatever be its character otherwise.”⁶⁰ On June 17, Smith penned a letter to Major General William H. Richards, Adjutant General of Virginia detailing the events of the previous few days in Lexington. Smith described why he believed his home was spared even though it was state property:

⁶⁰ Strother, 257.

The peculiar condition of my daughter, with a child only 48 hours old, induced my wife [Sarah Henderson Smith] to throw herself upon the courtesy of the commanding General. The appeal was not in vain; and I acknowledge with pleasure, this relaxation of the devastation which was unsparingly applied to every species of property owned by the state at the V.Mil. Institute, which we were unable to remove.⁶¹

The newborn's presence likely saved the home rather than its use as Hunter's headquarters since this was generally not sufficient cause to spare homes in other raids. Curiously, Hunter neglected to mention the Smith residence at all in his official report.

Like the Letcher story, the tale of the Smith home circulated widely among townspeople. Sixteen-year-old Fannie Wilson relayed it in a letter to her father on June 17: "Sunday morning about 10 o'clock the Yankees set fire to the Institute, blew the walls down and destroyed the mess hall and professors' houses, and if General Smith's daughter, Mrs. Morrison, had not been very ill they fully intended destroying his elegant mansion."⁶² Preston also commented on the incident in her diary:

We asked him [Dr. P.—likely the same Dr. Patton who had stayed in the Letcher home] if they were going to burn our house; he said "not if it is private property." Gen. Hunter has ordered the burning of all the V. M. I. professors' houses. Mrs. Smith plead for hers to be spared, on account of her daughter, who lies there desperately ill; that alone saved it. Hunter has his Head Quarters in it.⁶³

Another account of the Smith residence came from Rose Page Pendleton, the daughter of Confederate Brigadier General William Pendleton and the sister of Early's chief of staff, Colonel Sandie Pendleton. General Pendleton served as rector of Grace Episcopal Church in Lexington, and the family lived in the church's rectory. With the men away at war, Pendleton and the women of her family—her mother and unmarried

⁶¹ Francis H. Smith Letter, June 17, 1864, Hunter's Raid on VMI, VMI Archives.

⁶² Fannie Wilson Account, June 17, 1864, VMI Archives.

⁶³ Preston Diary, June 12, 1864.

sisters—witnessed the raid and reported incidents very similar to what her neighbor Margaret Junkin Preston experienced. The day of the Letcher burning, Pendleton reported, “All day they threatened to burn this house, but it not being ours they could not do it.”⁶⁴ Raiders similarly threatened Preston, “One cavalryman told me that if they all talked as I did, they would fire the entire town.” Although Dr. P. had assured Preston her home was safe because it was private property, she worried that she, too, would be burned out: “If our house is burned tonight, and we hear of my husband being captured or killed, what will life be worth? God protect and have mercy upon us all! To whom can we look but Thee!”⁶⁵ Civilians in Lexington had witnessed Hunter’s humanity as well as his destruction, but they remained uncertain of the limits he placed on the destruction and of their fate under his occupation. The rules that had been in place throughout the war protecting civilian homes were now called into question by civilians and soldiers alike.

Civilian homes remained standing after Hunter’s men left Lexington, but the shelling during the skirmish between Hunter and McCausland before the Confederate Army’s retreat on June 11 caused a great deal of damage. Hunter’s official report mentioned that “instead of crushing the place with my artillery, I sent General Averell with a brigade of cavalry” to engage the enemy.⁶⁶ Fannie Wilson’s letter to her father reflected the terror of a teenage girl under enemy fire for the first time in her young life:

The first shell that struck our part of town passed through Mrs. Johnston's house; the next one above ours tearing a circular hole just the size of the ball. We were standing in the front door when the ball passed over our heads, and fearing danger we went to the cellar, thinking that was the safest place, and were standing on the steps when we heard the whizzing near us; we found that another one had passed through our garret wall and

⁶⁴Rose Page Pendleton Diary, June 12, 1864, Rockbridge Historical Society Manuscript Collection.

⁶⁵ Preston Diary, June 12, 1864.

⁶⁶ Hunter, August 8, 1864, OR, 37, pt. I: 96-97.

struck the rafter, exploding with a thundering noise. It knocked nearly all the plastering off and all the sash out of the windows, made a great many large holes in the wall and floor. One piece passed through the ceiling of the passage, two small pieces perforated the ceiling of grandpa's room just above the head of his bed in which he was lying at the time in a doze, and was aroused by the fall of the plaster.⁶⁷

Hunter's restraint in demolishing the town with artillery escaped the notice of the civilians who experienced it.

Preston recorded the activity as well, "We have been shelled in reply [to McCaulsand's resistance] all day; one shell exploded in our orchard, a few yards beyond us, -- our house being just in their range as they threw them at the retreating Confederates."⁶⁸ News of the shelling even reached distant Halifax, North Carolina where diarist Catherine Ann Edmonston recorded and commented on news that touched her beloved Confederacy: "Hunter with usual Yankee barbarity shelled the town of Lexington without notice."⁶⁹ In reality, Hunter merely ran off Confederate troops before he crossed the river into the town itself. The artillery fire that seemed monumental to Lexingtonians would have been considered a much smaller inconvenience in Confederate towns that had seen a lot of action in the war. The psychological damage to the townspeople's peace of mind was far greater than the physical damage to their property.

Instead of artillery damage, the loss of provisions civilians recorded from widespread pillaging during the short occupation undoubtedly caused the most significant hardship of all. Hunter's strict orders regarding pillaging and looting fell by the wayside during his three days in the village. The Preston home received repeated visits from

⁶⁷ Fannie Wilson Letter, June 17, 1864.

⁶⁸ Preston, June 11, 1864.

⁶⁹ "Journal of a Secesh Lady": *The Diary of Catherine Ann Devereux Edmonston*, eds. Beth G. Crabtree and James W. Patton (Raleigh: North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1979), 585.

Hunter's men, even though it sat several blocks away from VMI and the Letcher home, which became ground zero for the raid. The Prestons, of course, received a great deal of notoriety because of Colonel Preston's connections to the Institute as well as their family connection to the late "Stonewall" Jackson. Their house also stood near the route many of the Union soldiers in Lexington took on their pilgrimage to Jackson's grave on the edge of town, a curious fact many people noted during the occupation.

At any rate, Preston recorded several visits during the raid, and her soldiers often left with items from the family's food stores. Days before Hunter's arrival, on June 7, word of the Union approach reached Lexington, and Preston reported, "All was such commotion as I have never seen in Lexington; people moving flour, goods, &c.; driving out their cows; ladies flying about in a high state of excitement. . . . I was busy until ten o'clock getting off our bacon and flour, which E. tells me the enemy is taking all along the route."⁷⁰ As Yankees entered her side of town on June 11, Preston engaged the marauders in a war of words:

At first they were content to receive bacon, two slices apiece; but they soon became insolent; demanded the smokehouse key, and told me they would break the door unless I opened it. I protested against their pillage, and with a score of them surrounding me, with guns in their hands, proceeded to the smokehouse and threw it open, entreating them at the same time, by the respect they had for their wives, mothers, and sisters, to leave me a little meat. They heeded me no more than wild beasts would have done; swore at me; and left me not one piece. Some rushed down the cellar steps, seized the newly churned butter there, and made off. I succeeded in keeping them out of the house. We have had no dinner; managed to procure a little supper; we have nailed up all the windows. I wrote a polite note to Gen. Averill, asking for a guard; none was sent. At ten we went to bed, feeling that we had nothing between these ravagers and us but God's protecting arm.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Preston Diary, June 7, 1864.

⁷¹ Preston Diary, June 11, 1865.

Colonel Preston had fled to the nearby mountains to escape capture, and Preston's home was targeted yet again by the enemy. On Sunday, June 12, she was astonished to see soldiers in her home once more:

I had left the smokehouse door open, to let them see that every piece of meat was taken (I had some hid under the porch, which as yet they have not found). They came into the dining-room, and began to carry away the china, when a young fellow from Philadelphia (he said) took the dishes from them, and made them come out. I told them all I was a Northern woman, but confessed that I was ashamed of my Northern lineage when I saw them come on such an errand. They demanded to be let into the cellar, and one fellow threatened me with the burning of the house if I did not give them just what they demanded. I said, "Yes, we are at your mercy -- burn it down -- but I won't give you the key."⁷²

The soldiers did not burn the house down, and Preston eventually received the guard she requested.

Later that same afternoon, Preston received word of more personal loss: "One of our overseers has just come into town, and has told one of our servants that every sheep has been slaughtered, every cow, and the horses carried off. We are ruined, nearly; if this house is burned, then all is gone but the bare land."⁷³ Preston credited the unnamed soldier who served as her guard with preserving her home by advising her to dispose of seven trunks the family held for VMI cadets who were out of town. Fearing repercussion for possessing contraband from the Institute, Preston cut the cadets' brand new uniforms into small strips and hid them in the attic. She had one more very valuable item that she kept secret even from her guard:

There was still Jackson's sword. With great trouble we carried it under our clothes -- that sword that had flashed victoriously over many a battle field -- and finally concealed it in an outhouse. Then breathing freely for the

⁷² Preston Diary, June 12, 1864.

⁷³ Preston Diary, June 12, 1864.

first time since our fright, we went to the guard and told him there was not to our knowledge, and we were willing to take our oath upon it, an article of contraband clothing, or an instrument of defence in the house. He said he was perfectly satisfied, and nobody should enter the house to search, except over him.⁷⁴

Preston succeeded in her deception, and the late general's sword escaped becoming the greatest trophy of all. Preston's ambiguous relationship with the occupying soldiers demonstrates a common tension between Union men and southern women. Soldiers' attitudes varied from animosity toward the de facto defenders of the homefront to a sense of chivalry and a desire to protect these women who reminded them of wives and mothers back home. The *Lynchburg Virginian* reprinted an excerpt from the *Lexington Gazette*, "During their march through the Valley they subsisted upon the people. Families were stripped of all their flour, meat, corn, lard, butter, and, indeed everything laid up for their support. They made no discrimination between the families of Unionists and Secessionists."⁷⁵ This lack of "discrimination" reveals that the Union Army employed hard war tactics on the southern population at large, regardless of loyalty, at least in the case of Lexington.

Hunter left Lexington on June 14 and turned east toward Lynchburg, determined to accomplish the goal Grant had originally set for him. He had not won any great military victory in Lexington and had not injured the Confederate infrastructure in any meaningful way. He did accomplish the temporary destruction of a loathsome southern institution that had humiliated his predecessor. Hunter had also introduced the people of

⁷⁴ Preston Diary, June 14, 1864.

⁷⁵ *Lynchburg Virginian*, July 25, 1864. The Lynchburg paper carried few stories about the Lexington raid; the paper concentrated instead on news of Hunter's approach to Lynchburg and the defense of that city. The printing press in Lexington itself was destroyed, and by the time the *Lexington Gazette* began publishing again in July, it largely reprinted accounts from citizens that are cited here from original documents.

Lexington to war in a new way. They had sent loved ones off to fight three years before, but they had not witnessed the destruction and terror of war itself. Union soldier Lynch wrote simply, “Lexington is a beautiful town. The scenery grand. Reported to us that the sound of Yankee guns had never been heard here before, or until today.”⁷⁶ Preston noted that the town had anticipated invasion in the past but had always been spared. Just before the raid, she wrote, “We have hidden our own valuables to some extent; and Mr. P. is having his bacon hauled into the mountains. Yet the enemy may not come; we have expected them *so* often when they didn't come, that we may be delivered again.”⁷⁷ Young Fannie Wilson recognized the hard lessons that came with invasion: “I seemed to have spent a lifetime in one day. I never before had an idea of the terror caused by the shelling of a town, never seemed to realize what it meant.”⁷⁸ Wilson could have spoken for most of the townspeople.

Lexington had indeed been more fortunate than many other Virginia towns within a hundred miles to the east or north. The fact that the town had only lately been at war dramatically improved its chances for rebuilding. Washington College sustained substantial loss in materials, but the buildings remained completely intact. Confederate General Robert E. Lee became president of the school several months after the war ended, and restoring the college to its former glory became his responsibility. In a letter to the Board of Trustees in June 1866, Lee mentioned the destruction, though he dated the raid incorrectly: “Owing to the impracticability of completing the repairs to the College buildings, and of restoring the furniture, apparatus destroyed by Genl Hunter’s

⁷⁶ Charles H. Lynch Diary, June 11, 1864.

⁷⁷ Preston Diary, June 7, 1864. Emphasis present in the original.

⁷⁸ Fannie Wilson Letter.

army in 1863, the exercises of the session did not commence until the 2nd. of Oct. 1865.”⁷⁹ Lee should be forgiven for the error in date; he was occupied with Union General Grant in Petersburg that June of 1864 when Hunter came through Lexington. In 1867, the Trustees of Washington College still felt the effects of Hunter’s Raid, though the school was operating on a normal schedule by then. A report to the Board of Trustees from the school’s librarian revealed lingering resentment:

The Library is much improved in appearance during the last twelve months. . . but it has not recovered entirely from the ravages of the Northern vandals who passed through our village in June 1864. Many of the books cause unpleasant feelings having the marks of their unholy hands upon them, many of the most valuable books with their mutilated sets remain an eyesore to the beholder keeping alive many disagreeable sensations against our invaders.⁸⁰

The preservation of Washington College during the raid demonstrated the hard line the Union Army attempted to draw between state and private property, at least at this point in the war. No one seems to have argued vigorously that the school warranted decimation. Washington College recovered quickly, and by late July 1864, the faculty began posting advertisements in the *Lexington Gazette* to announce the resumption of classes on September 15. The ad also discussed housing: “BOARDING can be procured in Lexington without difficulty—especially when payment is made in PROVISIONS.”⁸¹ The town swiftly attempted to return to a degree of normalcy.

Lexington’s other educational institution, Virginia Military Institute, faced extraordinary challenges, given that its student body was largely scattered by war and its

⁷⁹ Robert E. Lee to the Board of Trustees of Washington College, June 1866, Trustees Papers, Washington and Lee Archives. The school was renamed “Washington and Lee” after the former general’s tenure as president of the school.

⁸⁰ Report of Jacob Fuller, University Librarian, June 16, 1867, Trustees Papers, Washington and Lee.

⁸¹ *Lexington Gazette*, July 29, 1864. This ad ran for several weeks in the paper.

buildings were destroyed. The cadets relocated to Richmond for the duration of the war, but by October 1865, they returned to their Lexington campus to rebuild. Some of the very men who aided in its destruction later played major roles in its rebuilding. Strother, of course, arranged for the return of the Washington statue, which even today stands in front of the school's Washington Arch. Henry A. DuPont, the artillery commander who had shelled the school in advance of Hunter's occupation, introduced a bill in the Senate that President Woodrow Wilson eventually signed into law, awarding the school \$100,000 in compensation for wartime damages. Ironically, the funds helped build Jackson Memorial Hall, named for Confederate General "Stonewall" Jackson.⁸² Although the Institute's role in the rebellion justified its burning in most Union soldiers' opinions, DuPont's and Strother's postwar relief to the institution they both helped destroy revealed either a sense of regret for the burning or a sense of personal responsibility for helping to restore the school. Neither soldier appears to have wanted the legacy of Hunter's Raid to end with destruction alone.

Though the destruction in Lexington loomed large for residents in June 1864, the majority of the population proved remarkably accepting of their fate at David Hunter's hands. They understood that the presence of the Institute placed them at risk, and although they lamented the destruction of the buildings, they quickly resolved to rebuild and move forward. Townspeople and VMI faculty even saw the Institute's devastation as a badge of honor. The fact that Hunter targeted the institution validated its significance in the Confederate cause. "In a time of war it was not to be expected that the Va. Mil. Institute should escape the effects of the devastations which has visited by fire and rapine

⁸² "VMI Reparations Benefactor Recognized," April 22, 2009, <http://www.vmi.edu/content.aspx?id=38777> (accessed October 30, 2012).

the fairest portions of our beloved commonwealth,” wrote Superintendent Smith shortly after the fire.⁸³

The next month, in his annual report, Smith elaborated and even defended VMI as a legitimate target:

No one, therefore, belonging to the institution can complain that the rules of war should be applied to an establishment marked by such evidences of identification with our revolutionary struggle. It was to have been expected that the cadets should be pursued, that they might be either killed or captured. They asked no immunities from the rigors of war meted to others. The arms and munitions of war were proper subjects for capture or destruction. Its public buildings might have been held by the enemy as a barracks or hospital, and the school itself dispersed. But modern history is appealed to in vain for a like instance of devastation, as marked the track of the invader here.⁸⁴

Smith gave the impression that he would have been disappointed—dishonored, even—if the Institute had survived Hunter’s Raid unmolested. The Official Records reveal expectation of the Institute’s demise as well. On June 11, the day before the fire, John W. Brockenbrough, a Virginia judge, sent a message to Confederate Secretary of War James Seddon describing the military situation in Lexington and concluding, “Doubtless the Virginia Military Institute is now a heap of ruins.”⁸⁵ No one was surprised that Hunter set fire to the Institute.

Conversely, Hunter did surprise everyone and seemed to cross their definition of the line of civilized warfare when he targeted private property. Foraging and pillaging were clearly expected, as the townspeople removed food and valuables from their homes and attempted to conceal them in the mountains for safekeeping. Virginia had been at

⁸³ Francis H. Smith Letter, June 17, 1864, VMI Archives.

⁸⁴ Francis H. Smith, VMI Annual Report, July 15, 1864, VMI Archives.

⁸⁵ Brockenbrough to Seddon, June 11, 1864, OR, 37, pt. I: 757.

war too long for Lexington's civilians to expect any less at the hands of the invaders. There was an explicit expectation, though, on the part of both northern soldier and southern civilian that private homes were sacrosanct, even as late as 1864. One humorous story from Superintendent Smith's annual report in July 1864 demonstrates what civilians saw as the great divide between public and private:

All the regular Negro servants of the institution showed a marked fidelity. Our trusty baker, Anderson, the property of the institute, was stripped of everything; and on being asked whether he had made himself known as belonging to the state, promptly replied, "No indeed---if I had told the Yankees that, they would have burnt me up with the other state property."⁸⁶

In this anecdote, even slaves believed that public property was vulnerable to the Union Army, while private property was unassailable.

From her soapbox in North Carolina, Edmonston concluded her diary entry detailing the Letcher fire with commentary on the destruction of private property:

The savages, they cannot understand & are incapable of being made to appreciate the sublime lesson taught them last summer by Gen Lee in his march through Penn! -- a spectacle, however, at which one day the civilized world will stand in amazed admiration, amazed that an army burning under the sense of such wrongs & outrages on their own homes could yet leave unmolested the homes of their enemies when in their power, & *this*, & deeds worse than this, is the return we get for it!⁸⁷

Lee's march through the North on his way to Gettysburg set the standard in southern minds for the behavior of an army in enemy territory when he forbade Confederate troops from damaging private property; until the Second Valley Campaign, southerners

⁸⁶ Francis H. Smith, VMI Annual Report, July 15, 1864.

⁸⁷ Edmonston, 585.

expected similar treatment from the Union Army and compared them unfavorably to the Confederate Army when they failed to meet Lee's standards.⁸⁸

Residents throughout Rockbridge County felt the effects of the destruction, even if they did not experience it firsthand. Farmer Henry Boswell Jones of nearby Brownsburg was a longtime diarist who typically recorded brief notes about his crops, the weather, and the Sunday sermon. His much longer notes about Hunter's Raid are telling for their departure from his standard entries:

June 11—These past days are very eventful, both the Confederates and Federals have been about us. The people have suffered considerably but praise be to God our lives have been spared. June 14—the Federal army left Lexington, after burning the Institute, Governor John Letcher's home, the mills, all the store houses, the furnaces and taken off nearly all the good horses, cows and sheep in the county. They have done us much injury, oh! Lord have mercy upon us and them.⁸⁹

Jones lived outside Lexington and suffered no personal loss at the hands of the enemy, but he expressed dismay over the destruction, and the burning of mills and stores impacted residents beyond the town itself.

Perhaps the best expression of post-raid sentiment comes from Preston, who took up poetry after the raid and became known as the "Poetess of the Confederacy," even though she had identified herself as a "northern woman" when Yankee troops raided her home. On June 17, 1864, less than a week after the Union Army departed her town, Preston demonstrated the resilient spirit that permeated Lexington on the heels of disaster:

⁸⁸ Robert E. Lee, General Orders No. 73, June 27, 1863, OR 27, Pt. III: 942-943. The text of Lee's orders will appear in detail in the third chapter of this paper.

⁸⁹ *The Diary of Henry Boswell Jones of Brownsburg (1842-1871)*, ed. Charles W. Turner (Verona, VA: McClure Printing, 1979).

Our spirits begin to rise already, and we cease to feel subjugated, as we surely did two days ago. I thought the cause of the Confederacy was finished for the present, or at least that it was a hopeless struggle. I feel differently now. As to losses, Mr. P. says that \$30,000 would scarcely cover what he has lost by this invasion. He is a poor man now for the rest of his days, he says; but he bears it with a brave and Christian spirit, and utters no complaint.⁹⁰

The town had changed, and the people had changed, but neither had been destroyed.

Even the exterior walls of Virginia Military Institute still stood, a certain sign that

Lexington itself would survive.

⁹⁰ Preston Diary, June 17, 1864.

Chapter 2: McCausland's Raid on Chambersburg

The residents of Lexington quickly resolved to rebuild and move forward, but they harbored no thoughts of forgiveness for the destruction the Union Army had wrought. Within a month of Hunter's Raid, the *Lexington Gazette* called for retaliation: "Some of our soldiers who passed through the town a few days since the invader left declared that some Yankee institution should pay the appropriate penalty in full measure, if they were ever permitted to invade Northern territory. So may it be."¹ General David Hunter made his way to Lynchburg, but he retreated from a smaller Confederate force under Lieutenant General Jubal Early. On July 19, Hunter ordered the burning of three private homes in Jefferson County, West Virginia, each apparently singled out because of its owner. One belonged to Edmund Lee, a distant relative of Confederate General Robert E. Lee, and another to Alexander Boteler, who had served in the Confederate Congress. The third doomed residence was that of General Hunter's own cousin, Andrew Hunter, an attorney who had prosecuted John Brown in the famous Harpers Ferry trial. The southern press exhibited as much outrage over these three homes as they did the Letcher home in Lexington.

Meanwhile, the bulk of the opposing armies continued to stare at each other across their respective trenches in Petersburg, Virginia. Lee found himself tied down against Union General Ulysses S. Grant in a desperate attempt to prevent the capture of Richmond, and he entrusted the western flank of his army to Early and his 14,000 men. Early tried to divert Union troops from General Ulysses S. Grant's main army with an attack on the Union capital in Washington, but he was turned back just outside the city in

¹ *Lexington Gazette*, July 6, 1864.

mid-July. In addition to creating a diversion for Lee, he personally aspired to bring the war home to the North in a tangible way.

Early decided to compensate for the financial losses Hunter caused in Virginia and West Virginia by demanding ransoms from northern towns near the Confederate border. On July 6, he sent Brigadier General John McCausland and his 2,500 soldiers to Hagerstown, Maryland, with orders to obtain \$200,000; however, McCausland misread the orders and only acquired \$20,000.² McCausland made up the difference in nearby Frederick, successfully demanding \$200,000 from the townspeople.³ Maryland towns avoided the torch by contributing \$220,000 to Confederate coffers. The success of McCausland's ransom demands created a growing sense of urgency in towns near the Mason-Dixon Line.

Pennsylvania Governor Andrew Curtin feared a Confederate attack in his state, and both he and Major General Darius Couch asked Secretary of War Edwin Stanton for permission to activate the state militia for protection. Stanton denied the request, even though Couch commanded the Department of the Susquehanna, a unit that had been formed in 1863 to protect southern Pennsylvania.⁴ Meanwhile, Confederate units continued to harass and threaten Union supply and communication lines from Baltimore to southern Pennsylvania in an attempt to draw Union troops away from Petersburg. On July 29, an advance unit under McCausland skirmished with Brigadier General William

² D.N. Couch to Hon. E.M. Stanton, July 7, 1864, U.S. War Department, *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, vol. 37, pt. II: 116. Cited hereafter as OR; unless otherwise specified, all OR documents are located in Series I.

³ Report of Lieut. Gen. Jubal A. Early, July 14, 1864, OR 37, pt. I: 349. Unfortunately, Early's original orders to McCausland regarding Hagerstown and Chambersburg are not located in the OR.

⁴ Stanton to Couch, July 6, 1864, OR 37, pt. II: 94; Stanton to Curtin, July 6, 1864, OR 37, pt. I: 97.

Averell's cavalry for several hours in Hagerstown, eventually driving Union troops twelve miles north to Greencastle, Pennsylvania.⁵

The next day, McCausland rode into Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, no doubt hoping to reproduce his previous success in obtaining a ransom. He took around 600 men into Chambersburg itself and posted his remaining 2,000 men and 6 artillery pieces on the outskirts of town to scout for Union troops. This time, Early had instructed McCausland to demand the enormous sum of \$500,000 in greenbacks or \$100,000 in gold; if the townspeople did not pay, troops were ordered to set fire to the town. Early rationalized his decision in his postwar memoirs:

A number of towns in the South, as well as private country houses, had been burned by the Federal troops. I came to the conclusion it was time to open the eyes of the people of the North to this enormity, by an example in the way of retaliation. . . . I desired to give the people of Chambersburg an opportunity of saving their town, by making compensation for part of the injury done, and hoped the payment of such a sum would have the effect of causing the adoption of a different policy.⁶

Early's explanation revealed that the raid on Chambersburg was about much more than money. He sought retribution for the damage that had been done in the South and claimed that he thought the raid might steer the Union's war policy away from hard war where southern civilians were concerned.

McCausland's postwar account verified Early's version, adding, "It appears that the policy of General Early had been adopted upon proper reflection; that his orders were distinct and final, and that what was done on this occasion by my command was not the

⁵ D.N. Couch to H.W. Halleck, July 29, 1864, OR 37, pt. II: 506.

⁶ Jubal Anderson Early. *War Memories: Autobiographical Sketch and Narrative of the War Between the States*, ed. Frank E. Vandiver (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960), 401-402.

result of inconsiderate action or want of proper authority.”⁷ Two important facts emerge from McCausland: Early was responsible for ordering the burning in Chambersburg, and Early had, presumably, carefully weighed and considered the implementation of hard war in Pennsylvania. McCausland did not believe his general had acted rashly and without thought.

Ironically, Lee had issued orders forbidding the destruction of private property the year before *from* Chambersburg, on his army’s march through Pennsylvania to the battle of Gettysburg:

No greater disgrace could befall the army, and through it our whole people, than the perpetration of the barbarous outrages upon the unarmed and defenseless and the wanton destruction of private property, that have marked the course of the enemy in our own country. . . . It must be remembered that we make war only upon armed men, and that we cannot take vengeance for the wrongs our people have suffered without lowering ourselves in the eyes of all whose abhorrence has been excited by the atrocities of our enemies, and offending against Him to whom vengeance belongeth, without whose favor and support our efforts must all prove in vain.

He then “earnestly exhort[ed] the troops to abstain with most scrupulous care from unnecessary or wanton injury to private property” and “enjoin[ed] upon all officers to arrest and bring to summary punishment all who shall in any way offend against the orders on this subject.”⁸ Lee’s orders in the summer of 1863 had set the standard for expected behavior of Confederate troops; they were well known and often repeated. It

⁷ John M’Causland, “The Burning of Chambersburg,” in *The Annals of the Civil War Written by Leading Participants North and South*, ed. Alexander Kelly McClure, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2001.05.0012%3Achapter%3D55> (accessed January 29, 2013). McCausland’s name is commonly spelled “M’Causland” in the northern press. The spellings remain consistent with the original documents.

⁸ Robert E. Lee, General Orders No. 73, June 27, 1863, OR 27, Pt. III: 942-943.

also bears noting that Lee issued those orders nearly a year before the Union Army began employing hard war policies consistently in the South.

Confederate troops had visited Chambersburg several times in the past: J. E. B. Stuart conducted a famous horse raid there in 1862 and, as Lee's orders showed, the bulk of the Confederate Army had passed through the town on the way to Gettysburg, which lay twenty miles west. Fearing yet another Confederate raid, Chambersburg leaders claimed to have moved the bank deposits out of town, making them both unwilling and unable to pay the enormous amount McCausland demanded.⁹ A Chambersburg newspaper from August 8 provided details on the ransom demand, "[McCausland] had the Court House bell rung to convene the citizens, hoping to frighten them into the payment of a large sum of money; but no one attended. No . . . effort was made either by individuals singly or in organized capacities to make terms—all had resolved that the free-booter should fulfill his threat rather than pay tribute."¹⁰ This particular article appeared more than a week after the burning, so the details of the townspeople's reaction may reflect more bravado than they actually exhibited at the time.

One eyewitness wrote, "The citizens stated that it was utterly impossible to pay the sum named either in gold or currency, and that the demand could not be made in good faith. They further remonstrated against the monstrosity of burning a whole town of six thousand inhabitants, in retaliation for the six or eight houses" that had been burned in

⁹ Chambersburg residents J. W. Douglas and A. Holler both substantiate the claim that the bank had relocated its funds in anticipation of an enemy raid. Jacob Hoke, *Historical Reminiscences of the War or Incidents Which Transpired in and about Chambersburg during the War of the Rebellion* (Chambersburg, PA: M. A. Foltz, 1884), 112-113.

¹⁰ "Tribute Demanded," *Franklin Repository*, August 8, 1864. The local presses burned in the raid, and newspapers resumed printing shortly after.

Virginia and West Virginia.¹¹ McCausland waited to see if his demand would be met, later insisting that he gave the town six hours' notice. He wrote in his postwar account, "After a few hours of delay many citizens came to me—some were willing to pay the money, others were not. I urged them to comply with such reasons as occurred to me at the time, and told them plainly what they might expect."¹² None of the townspeople's accounts supported McCausland's claim that he gave them six hours' notice before ordering the burning. McCausland likely tried to ameliorate his reputation after the war. Furthermore, Averell's 2nd Cavalry Division of around 2,500 men was close by, and time was short. Confederate Captain Harry Gilmor recounted that "scouts returned with a prisoner from Averill's command, reporting him to be not more than two or three miles off, with a heavy force of cavalry. The citizens knew it too, and positively refused to raise the money, laughing at us when we threatened to burn the town."¹³

Despite the Confederate warnings, townspeople failed to meet the demand, and Confederate troops set about the grim task of razing the town. Newspaper reports and personal letters from the time varied wildly on the damage, but the commonly accepted statistics are the following: 550 buildings were destroyed, including 278 homes and businesses (the remaining structures were barns and outbuildings). More than 2,000 people were left homeless, and real estate damages totaled over \$783,000.¹⁴ One resident summed up the damage as follows, "The entire heart or body of the town is burned. Not a house or building of any kind is left on a space of about an average of two squares of

¹¹ Rev. B.S. Schneck, D.D., *The Burning of Chambersburg, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Lindsay & Blakiston, 1865), 15.

¹² M'Causland.

¹³ Harry Gilmor, *Four Years in the Saddle* (1866; repr., Baltimore, MD: Butternut and Blue, 1987), 209.

¹⁴ Ted Alexander, *Southern Revenge!: Civil War History of Chambersburg, Pennsylvania* (Chambersburg, PA: Greater Chambersburg Chamber of Commerce and White Mane Publishing Company, 1989), 132.

streets, extending each way from the centre, with some four or five exceptions, where the buildings were isolated. Only the outskirts are left.”¹⁵ Ironically, one of the houses on the outskirts of town that remained standing had housed John Brown while he planned his doomed raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859.¹⁶

Harrowing stories from the victims immediately poured out. Citizens reported soldiers breaking into homes and businesses and drinking all the alcohol they could find. Plundering and looting abounded and went unchecked by the officers. The newspaper hinted that McCausland’s men had experience in pillaging and had even been *trained* to do so, saying they “exhibited the proficiency of their training by immediate and almost indiscriminate robbery.” The article cited soldiers’ robbing of people on the streets and credited the thieves as having “a dexterity that would have done credit to the free-booting accomplishments of an Italian brigand.”¹⁷ Theft continued inside private homes as the raiders divided into “squads” and moved from house to house, robbing and burning. Townspeople widely reported that soldiers demanded bribes to save individual homes, sometimes burning the homes even after ransoms were paid:

Many families had the utmost difficulty to get themselves and children out in time and not one-half had so much as a change of clothing with them. . . . Several invalids had to be carried out as the red flames licked their couches. Thus the work of desolation continued for two hours. . . . No one was spared save by accident.¹⁸

¹⁵ Schneck, 16.

¹⁶ Some reports from the time indicated that Chambersburg was targeted by Confederate troops because of its connection to John Brown, but this seems highly unlikely since the house he had lived in did not burn in the raid.

¹⁷ “Plundering Promptly Commenced,” *Franklin Repository*, August 24, 1864.

¹⁸ “Burning of Chambersburg,” *Franklin Repository*, August 24, 1864.

Some of the eyewitness reports likely exaggerated the terror caused by undisciplined Confederate soldiers, but the careful restraint Hunter had exhibited in Lexington was clearly absent in his Confederate counterpart.

With many of the men away at war, women were left to fend off the invaders.

One soldier's wife recorded her experience in a diary,

They gave no time for people to get any thing out. Each had to escape for life & took only what they could first grab. Some saved considerable. Others only the clothes on their backs--& even some of those were taken off as they escaped from their burning dwellings. O! the 30th July 1864 was a sad day to the people of Chambersburg. In most of cases where the buildings were left money was paid. They were here too but we talked them out of it. We told them we were widdows [sic] & that saved us here.¹⁹

Louisa Brand became the town's heroine when she wrapped an American flag around herself, "and with revolver in hand, stood in the front door of their house and dared any rebel to fire the house or disturb the flag. She passed unmolested and the house was not burned."²⁰ Some of the Confederate raiders demonstrated a reluctance to burn out women—either because they appeared defenseless, or because they dared to defend their homes.

In another memorable incident, a new mother lay dead inside a house that was ordered burned, "and although they were shown the dead body, they plied the torch and burned the house." A neighbor had the deceased woman's "sick babe in her arms, and plead for the sake of the dead mother and sick child to spare that house, but it was unavailing. The body. . . was hurriedly buried in the garden, and the work of destruction

¹⁹ Rachel Cormany, *The Cormany Diaries: A Northern Family in the Civil War*, edited by James C. Mohr (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982), 446.

²⁰ Hoke, 123. The flag and revolver are proudly displayed in the town's museum to this day.

went on.”²¹ Eyewitnesses sometimes exaggerated that “bundles were fired upon women’s backs; ladies were forced to carry back into the houses articles of clothing they had saved from the flames . . . aged women were locked in their rooms while their houses were on fire.”²² Ironically, the mayhem and destruction only resulted in one death: an elderly former slave who resided in Chambersburg died from a probable heart attack hours after the fire, late in the day on July 30.²³

The northern press predictably characterized McCausland and his men as heartless villains. One short article from the *Franklin Repository* claimed that, when asked where he was born, “M’Causland said *he was from hell*. For a verification of his statement witness Chambersburg in ruins.”²⁴ The *New York Herald* described him in piratic terms as “a desperate, ferocious and untamed freebooter, ready at any time to violate the usages of honorable warfare in order to gratify his dark and malignant passions.” Of the destruction itself, the paper said, “The citizens without protest had submitted to plunder, and had even appealed to the mercy of the rebels, but nothing could appease the butcher and incendiary McCausland.”²⁵ A Connecticut newspaper described the Chambersburg fire as an act “of wanton and diabolical destruction, instigated by the same fiendish impulses which prompted. . . other barbarities that have marked the

²¹ Schneck, 24. All direct quotes have been written as they appear in the transcriptions or originals; spelling and grammar mistakes are consistent with transcriptions and, presumably, original manuscripts.

²² John K. Shryock, *Lutheran and Missionary*, August 11, 1864, reprinted in Schneck, 61. Shryock’s description of women almost being burned to death deliberately is not supported in other accounts and was likely an exaggeration, especially since this story was included in Schneck’s book as a tool for raising relief funds.

²³ Alexander, 132.

²⁴ “Gen. M’Causland’s Nativity,” *Franklin Repository*, August 24, 1864. Emphasis present in the original.

²⁵ “The Burning of Chambersburg,” *The New York Herald*, August 1, 1864, from *Civil War: A Newspaper Perspective*. All information from *The New York Herald* was obtained from this database.

progress of the rebellion.”²⁶ Both papers failed to mention the destruction Union armies had brought on southern civilians prior to this incident.

McCausland carried out his orders with little hesitation, but not all of his men agreed with the use of hard war. A Union cavalry sergeant (dressed in civilian clothes) who was in Chambersburg when McCausland arrived reported that Brigadier General Bradley T. Johnson asked McCausland “to relent or at least give the citizens more time, but he was determined.”²⁷ A handful of stories emerged from civilian eyewitness that paid tribute to Confederate soldiers who either refused to participate in the destruction or tried to aid townspeople. Jacob Hoke remembered that a Confederate officer “cried out, ‘See! See!! Oh my God! My God!! Has it come to this that we must be made a band of thieves and robbers by a man like McCausland?’ About that time another soldier came up, and unbuckling his sword placed it in our house and went away.”²⁸

Similar stories emerged from members of the community of Confederate resistance to the destruction. Eliza R. Stouffer wrote from Franklin County, Pennsylvania—the county surrounding Chambersburg—to a friend, describing the range of responses the Confederate soldiers had to their orders, “Many [victims] had only 10 to 15 minutes time given them to leave their houses, and they forbid many, to take any thing out some saved a few clothes, others none at all, but what they had on their backs, some had their clothing & money packed up, and were not allowed to take them out,” but some soldiers “were more merciful, & helped the women to carry out things some appeared to

²⁶ “Chambersburg,” *Hartford Daily Courant*, August 1, 1864, from America’s Historical Newspapers.

²⁷ Will. S. Kochersperger, August 9, 1864, OR 37, pt. I: 334-335. Kochersperger was a sergeant in the 20th Pennsylvania Cavalry and was “on detached duty at headquarters of the department” at Chambersburg when the burning occurred.

²⁸ Hoke, 115.

be very much affected that they had come to this, one in particular I was told off [of], that shed tears & would not help to burn. They took him & hand cuffed him.”²⁹ Another reported that “some of the rebel officers + men that were here did not expect this vandalism, + they showed a good spirit—they did + would not fire any building + even helped people to carry out things out of their houses. They denounced the whole procedure as outrageous and wicked.”³⁰ The *Franklin Repository* published an entire article dedicated to “Humane Rebel Officers” who opposed the destruction and tried to aid victims. One captain “asked a citizen as a special favor to write to his friends in Baltimore and acquit him of the hellish work.” Another admitted he was “ashamed to say that Gen. M’Causland is my commander!”³¹ At least some of the soldiers with strong objections to the burning refused or spoke out strongly against their commanders, often at great personal risk. Meanwhile, the victims of Chambersburg seemed to assess fairly the actions and attitudes of the raiders, when they easily could have vilified them all. Soldiers and civilians on opposite sides of the conflict struggled to sort out the meaning of the destruction.

Hard war was new to Confederate soldiers who had largely fought a defensive war on their own land, and many found that they did not have a taste for destroying private property. One Virginia soldier wrote home, “City fired about noon. Saddest spectacle I ever witnessed to see the women and children. This inaugurates a terrible

²⁹ Eliza R. Stouffer to her “Sister in Faith,” August 14, 1864, in *The Valley of the Shadow*. The soldier who refused to participate in the burning and was arrested by his commanding officer could have been Colonel William Peters, whose refusal and arrest are well documented, including in Alexander, 123-4.

³⁰ Benjamin S. Schneck to Margaretta S. Keller and her husband, August 3, 1864, in *The Valley of the Shadow*.

³¹ “Humane Rebel Officers,” August 24, 1864, *Franklin Repository*.

system of retaliation, devastation and rapine.”³² On August 8, he reflected, “I presume for the present the raid is over and if God will forgive me for this I shall try and keep out of all future raids under the same officers. . . . ‘Tis the first and I hope it will be the last time I shall have to blush for CS soldiers.”³³

Not all Confederates “blushed” in shame for their army, but many soldiers seemed to have a common distaste for this type of raid, even if they were not directly involved. A Confederate prisoner of war in Ohio reacted with typical ambivalence about the news coming out of Chambersburg, “Never was there before as arrant a nation of hypocrites and cowards as these North men—crying out against vandalism while they are themselves the chief vandals of the age, and boldest always when they have to wage war against unarmed citizens and defenseless women and children.” He echoed many southerners’ responses to news of the raid but went on to explain the complexity of his reaction,

I do not justify the burning of Chambersburg, for I would feel much prouder of my country to see her scorn to stoop to an unworthy method of retaliation or revenge; but at the same time, I can not express my contempt and disgust at the spectacle of the whole yankee nation lifting up hands of holy horror at the burning of one small village, while they have been chanting *Te Deums* most devoutly for four years over the wide-spread desolation they have caused in the South.³⁴

Soldiers who did not condone the burning of Chambersburg nonetheless recognized it as an effective means of bringing the war home to the enemy and may have felt that the Union had brought the destruction upon itself as recompense for its own use of hard war tactics.

³² Diary of Achilles Tynes, July 29, 1864, *The Valley of the Shadow*. Tynes’ diary must be dated incorrectly, as the burning occurred on July 30.

³³ Tynes, August 8, 1864.

³⁴ Diary of Daniel Robinson Hundley, August 1, 1864, from *The American Civil War: Letters and Diaries*.

The Chambersburg raid elicited criticism from Confederate officers as well who were not with McCausland during the event. Lieutenant Henry Kyd Douglas reflected on the burning years later, “Whether this kind of warfare, the destruction of private property, is excusable, when not necessary for the protection of an army, may be debatable. The provocation in this case was so great that it has not been questioned; but neither in principle nor policy can I see any good reason for such retaliation.”³⁵ Confederate General John B. Gordon lamented that the incident “blurred and blackened” the war’s history with “such ugly records of widespread and pitiless desolation.”³⁶ The fact that both Douglas and Gordon openly criticized the destruction years after the war reveals the strong impression it left on them, especially since they were eyewitnesses themselves.

J. Kelly Bennette did participate in the raid on Chambersburg, and in his diary, he revealed the uncertainty that many other soldiers must have felt about carrying out their unusual orders:

The burning of Chambersburg was generally condemned by our Regt. at first when all the sympathies were all aroused, but when reason had time to regain her seat I believe that they all thought as I thought at first; that it was Justice & Justice tempered with Mercy. That burning per se is wrong no one can deny. . . . Thru several times since the beginning of this war we have had opportunities of laying waste northern cities & private property generally. But instead of this we have pursued toward them a course uniformly conciliatory hoping by this means to set the war on a civilized footing & thus protect our defenceless [sic] ones at home. Orders were issued that private property must be respected as we came not to pillage & destroy but to conquer a peace.³⁷

³⁵ Henry Kyd Douglas, *I Rode with Stonewall* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 303.

³⁶ John Brown Gordon, *Reminiscences of the Civil War* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904), 306.

³⁷ Diary of J. Kelly Bennette, July 30, 1864, from *The Valley of the Shadow*.

Bennette's reaction reflects the change in policy toward private property that occurred on both sides in the summer of 1864—Union and Confederate officers began to practice hard war, though in varying degrees.

Bennette considered the destruction Yankee armies had caused all the way from New Orleans to Virginia, and he found the Confederacy's conciliatory policies lacking. He concluded, "Now everyone knows that the conciliatory policy has failed—utterly failed--& we are driven nolens volens to the opposite mode of procedure." Bennette also believed that Confederate raiders compared favorably to their Union counterparts,

Instead of snatching from the hands of the ladies what they had saved from their burning houses & throwing it back into the flames as the Yankees did. . . our men could be seen all over the city checking the fire or carrying trunks, bundles &c. for the ladies. How beautiful the contrast!

He acknowledged that "there were some who having become drunk seemed to glory in spreading destruction but it must also be remembered that many of them have had strong provocation."³⁸ Bennette exaggerated his comrades' chivalry, as many Confederate soldiers willingly carried out their orders to plunder, threaten, and destroy. Gilmore explained the issue, "Hitherto the fires had been applied to the houses of my friends, which roused within me feelings of the sternest vengeance. . . yet my pity was highly excited in behalf of these poor unfortunates, who were made to suffer for acts perpetrated by the officers of their own government."³⁹ The Confederacy may not have consciously altered its policy toward civilians, but the traditional rules protecting private property were clearly softening on both sides. General John Imboden spoke for many southerners when he justified Chambersburg's destruction. After the war he wrote, "When goaded to

³⁸ Bennette.

³⁹ Gilmore, 212.

madness, remuneration was demanded at their [the people of Chambersburg's] hands by General Early, and upon its refusal retaliation was inflicted on the nearest community that could be reached, and it was their misfortune to be that community."⁴⁰

The southern press expressed considerably less doubt about the destruction in Pennsylvania. A Richmond paper wrote, "A course of duty no longer to be neglected or delayed will forever justify the burning of Chambersburg. This is but the beginning of the end. We know that this burning will render you [the Union] more cruel than ever."⁴¹ The *Lynchburg Virginian* rejoiced at the news coming out of Pennsylvania, "We have heard of nothing during the war that has given us more real pleasure—the only regret we feel being that a dozen towns of Pennsylvania are not included in the conflagration. But we have made a good beginning and McCausland has inaugurated the true system."⁴² Another reported, "This carries the war home to the doors of the Yankees, and is a good retaliation for the burning of Jacksonville, Florida; Jackson, Mississippi, and other cities in the South."⁴³ Days later, the editor unleashed a ferocious attack on the recent victims:

Vengeance has come at last, and it has come in a form so terrible that the Yankee heart is appalled at its aspect. We love to hear these cries of anguish. . . . Glad are we that retribution has at last put forth its terrible arm and assumed its most terrible shape. We hope it will not stop here. We hope it will be pushed to the farthest extremity to which it is capable of going. . . . No sight could be more agreeable to our eyes than to behold every part of Yankeedom within reach of our armies converted into a mass of ashes.⁴⁴

Newspaper editors in Virginia had lived through four years of fear that the enemy would sack and burn their own towns, and they had witnessed firsthand the destruction the

⁴⁰ J.D. Imboden, "Fire, Sword, and the Halter," in *The Annals of the Civil War*, 183.

⁴¹ "Opinion of the Rebel Press," *Franklin Repository*, August 24, 1864.

⁴² "The Burning of Chambersburg," *Lynchburg Virginian*, August 8, 1864.

⁴³ "The Latest Invasion of Pennsylvania," *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, August 4, 1864.

⁴⁴ "Sauce for the Goose, Sauce for the Gander," *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, August 5, 1864.

Union Army wrought on the South. They could more easily applaud and encourage destruction on the northern homefront when they themselves did not bear responsibility for lighting the torches. In addition, they sought to inflame southern resistance as the Confederate Army faced increasing desperation on the field.

The question of where the blame lay for the burning arose almost as soon the enemy left town. Chambersburg resident Reverend Benjamin S. Schneck became the most prolific chronicler of the burning, not only penning letters to friends and family describing the burning, but also publishing a short book titled *The Burning of Chambersburg, Pennsylvania*, in which he described himself as “an eye-witness and a sufferer,” having lost his own home to the flames. Schneck’s eyewitness account became very popular, citing the most inflammatory stories that emerged from witnesses and victims and describing the townspeople as longsuffering but optimistic victims. The publication soon had to be reprinted to meet demand. The book listed the buildings destroyed in Chambersburg, along with the estimated value of each, so it became a valuable tool for raising funds to rebuild.

Schneck blamed the destruction on the highest echelons of leadership in the Confederacy, citing the witness of a local attorney who saw the order from Early to burn the town. Schneck reasoned, “The burning of Chambersburg was therefore by an order from one of the corps commanders of General Lee’s army, instead of the work of a guerrilla chief, thus placing the responsibility squarely upon the shoulders of General Lee.”⁴⁵ The local paper agreed with Schneck’s assessment, adding,

⁴⁵ Schneck, 29.

When a corps commander under special orders from Gen. Lee, deliberately directs a town to be sacked and destroyed by fire, without even the pretext that any of its citizens had violated the accepted rules of civilized warfare, the government can do no less than bring the rebel authorities to the strictest accountability for the act.⁴⁶

No evidence links Lee to the burning or suggests that he either gave orders relating to the destruction or even knew about it until after the fact. Early claimed full responsibility in his memoirs, “I, alone, am responsible, as the officers engaged in it were simply executing my orders, and had no discretion left them. Notwithstanding the lapse of time which has occurred and the result of the war, I see no reason to regret my conduct on this occasion.”⁴⁷ Lee left no personal letters mentioning the burning of Chambersburg, and Early took his silence on the issue as approval: “General Lee never in any manner indicated disapproval of my act, and his many letters to me expressive of confidence and friendship forbade the idea that he disapproved of my conduct on that occasion.”⁴⁸ Early commonly inflated his relationship with Lee in his postwar writings, so only Lee himself could say what his true opinion was.

In Lee’s defense, Gordon argued, “It was a source of special and poignant pain to General Lee that the very town in which this order was penned and issued should become, at a later period, the scene of retaliatory action.”⁴⁹ Lee did write to Confederate President Jefferson Davis just five days after the fire, reporting that McCausland had been to Chambersburg, but he did not mention the destruction, which he would certainly have heard about by that date.⁵⁰ On the same day that McCausland laid waste to

⁴⁶ “Wanted—A Policy,” *Franklin Repository*, August 24, 1864.

⁴⁷ Early, 404.

⁴⁸ Early, 478.

⁴⁹ Gordon, 307.

⁵⁰ Robert E. Lee Letter to Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee Papers, Washington and Lee University Archives, <http://hdl.handle.net/11021/21765> (accessed February 11, 2013).

Chambersburg, Union troops exploded a mine under Confederate breastworks at Petersburg, and Lee was understandably occupied with the more pressing matter of preventing Richmond's capture. Lee seems to have been unaware of Early's intentions before the raid; one can only guess what his feelings were once he learned of the outcome. At any rate, the ransom and burning of northern towns was never repeated by the Confederate Army, so it is unlikely that Lee embraced Early's tactics as a plausible war policy, especially since Confederate soldiers never made their way north again during the war.

Although Early willingly claimed responsibility for the raid, many northerners also blamed Union generals Couch and Averell. Couch's Department of the Susquehanna bore responsibility for the defense of southern Pennsylvania, and Averell's cavalry had spent the fateful morning of July 30 in Greencastle, only ten miles from Chambersburg. Averell had also participated in Hunter's Raid in Lexington, Virginia and was widely reported by his own men to have opposed the burnings there. Correspondence between the two shows Couch's concern about Confederates in the area, yet he struggled to get a timely response from Averell. Around 3:30 a.m. on July 30, Averell received two telegrams from Couch. The first read, "The enemy are just at the edge of town. Let me know what you intend doing."⁵¹ The second telegram followed immediately, with an increasing sense of urgency: "The enemy are advancing on the Loudon pike. Let me know what you intend doing. I will endeavor to hold the town until daylight."⁵² As residents of Chambersburg strove to understand why their town had been

⁵¹ Couch to Averell, July 30, 1864, OR 37, pt. II: 514.

⁵² Couch to Averell, July 30, 1864, OR 37, pt. II: 515.

targeted and not protected, many naturally questioned the army's sluggish response to the crisis.

Averell's reluctance to ride the short distance to defend Chambersburg defied logic. Emma V. Stouffer repeated a rumor regarding Averell in a letter to her brother,

Some attach great blame to gens Couch and Averel. The former some persons say should have rallied the 1500 men who went through here on Friday eve, and the latter was so drunk in GreenCastle that he could not write an answer to a dispatch sent him by Couch. It is hard to tell where the blame rests it surely is a shame that so few should come in & do so much damage.⁵³

One Union report to Couch and Governor Curtin stated plainly, "Averell's force was within eight miles, between Greencastle and Fayetteville, during Friday [July 29] night and Saturday [the day of the burning], and did not enter Chambersburg until 3 p.m."⁵⁴

Lincoln's former Secretary of War Simon Cameron--then chairman of the Committee of Public Safety--complained to the president from the state capital of Harrisburg, "Rebels entered Chambersburg at 3 o'clock this morning. . . . This is fifty miles from here. Send us a general fit to command, and we will try to take care of ourselves. General Couch is said to be at Bedford."⁵⁵ Couch curtly replied that Cameron's request would "be productive of more injury than good unless the State looks to Harrisburg to furnish all of the men for her defense."⁵⁶ Civilians felt that their trust in the Union Army had been sorely misplaced.

One Chambersburg newspaper exonerated Couch and assigned blame to a higher level of authority: "Chambersburg was the 'Headquarters of the Military Department of

⁵³ Emma V. Stouffer to Amos Stouffer, August 1, 1864, from *The Valley of the Shadow*.

⁵⁴ D. McConaughy to Couch and Curtin, July 31, 1864, OR 37, pt. II: 542.

⁵⁵ Cameron to Lincoln, July 30, 1864, OR 37, pt. II: 526.

⁵⁶ Couch to Cameron, July 30, 1864, OR 37, pt. II: 527.

the Susquehanna'. . . . If it was worth establishing and dignifying with the title of a 'Military Department' it was worth defending, but that obvious sequen[c]e seems never to have entered the military combinations of the brainless blunderers at Washington." In case the higher-ups in Washington missed the point, the article clarified, "To the stupidity of the War Department must we lay the destruction of Chambersburg." The editor warned, "It will some day be made the subject of investigation . . . why the Shenandoah and Cumberland Valleys have been left as raging grounds to the rebels? . . . Why our towns are left unprotected that they may be ransomed to enrich the rebel commissariat?"⁵⁷ The residents of Chambersburg expressed a strong sense of injustice that they were not allowed to defend themselves under the rules of war, yet they were left unprotected from the enemy by their own army time and again.⁵⁸

Obviously, the majority of the blame for the fires rested with the Confederates. Logically, some of the blame went to the Union Army. But what is most surprising is that many northerners outside the area also blamed the very victims of the Chambersburg raid for the misfortune that had befallen them. Just four days after the burning, the Democratic Party-leaning newspaper *The New York Herald* sarcastically reported, "Their town has suffered to the extent of over a million of dollars—a sum which appears so stupendous in their eyes as to require a call upon the charity of the whole North. We think, however, that this is a case which ought to be left exclusively to the charity of Pennsylvania." The article explained, "We of New York can have very little commiseration for a community of six thousand people who have, without a show of

⁵⁷ "Where the Blame Belongs," *Valley Spirit*, August 31, 1864.

⁵⁸ Today the town of Chambersburg has a statue of a Union soldier in the town square—in the middle of the burned district—facing south, guarding against invasion.

resistance from a solitary inhabitant, permitted their town to be entered, plundered and set on fire in fifty places by a contemptible squad of less than five hundred rebel ragamuffins.” Even more dramatically, the author opined, “There is no excuse for the people of Chambersburg. They were abundantly warned of their danger months ago, and if they decided to trust to luck. . . in facing armed rebels, they have paid the penalty of their folly.” The article concluded, “Charity, in all such unsatisfactory cases as this Chambersburg misfortune, ought to begin at home. Indeed, as a case for charity, this affair should not be paraded before the world.”⁵⁹

In a similarly “uncharitable” tone, a later article from the same newspaper blamed Chambersburg civilians for trusting their protection to “the blundering administration at Washington.” Furthermore, “they have not done their duty towards their own protection, and they must therefore bear the burden of the responsibility for their late disasters.” While the article called for relief for “the helpless women and children among them,” it warned, “Let not the people of Pennsylvania cry again to Hercules until they have put their own shoulders to the wheel.”⁶⁰ By mid-1864, New Yorkers felt certain that Confederate raiders would not target them, making it safe for them to condemn the Pennsylvania town that lay less than twenty miles from the Mason-Dixon Line and the enemy on the other side of it. In addition, *The New York Herald* tended toward only nominal unionism and veered treacherously close to supporting the southern cause in its editorial views, especially for a northern newspaper.

⁵⁹ “A Begging Appeal from Chambersburg,” *The New York Herald*, August 3, 1864. Frederic Hudson served as editor of *The New York Herald* during the Civil War and was responsible for the coverage of Chambersburg.

⁶⁰ “The Late Chambersburg Calamity,” *The New York Herald*, August 7, 1864.

In the midst of newspaper hyperbole, one African American Union soldier wrote to his sister back home in Chambersburg and echoed the New York press, criticizing the “men in Chambersburg that would let two hundred rebels come and burn the place for I am a soldier myself and I know what fighting is the compy [company] that I belong to has 80 sume [some] men in it and I know that we can Wipe the best 200 rebels that thay [sic] can fetch to us or let us get where thay [sic] are.”⁶¹ The noncombatants in Chambersburg could not win; if they had fought back, they would have been subject to treatment as guerillas, and since they did not fight back, outsiders labeled them cowards.

The Chambersburg newspaper did fight back and attempted to resurrect the town’s reputation from the scurrilous assault by *The New York Herald*. In an open letter “To the Editor of the *New York Herald*,” the editor of the *Valley Spirit* wrote, “Scarce an adequate idea can be formed of what hellish wickedness has been perpetrated upon us without actual observation. And let me say that without the knowledge of the facts, it is impardonable cruelty for editors to comment upon our condition, throwing the odium and blame upon ourselves.” The article explained that the people of Chambersburg were entitled to protection from Confederate raids, something they had experienced more than once during the war:

It may be very pleasant for people in the east secure from danger to scorn and sneer at those in this valley and laugh at their apparent timidity. But if they were made to feel the hand of the invader as we have repeatedly, they might appreciate sympathy quite as well and hurl back the indignities and opprobrium endeavored to be fastened upon them.⁶²

⁶¹ Jacob Christy to Mary Jane Demus, August 10, 1864, from Virginia Center for Digital History, <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/civwarlett-browse?id=F3004> (accessed February 8, 2013). Spellings are consistent with the original document.

⁶² W.I. Cook, “A Citizen to the *New York Herald*,” *Valley Spirit*, August 31, 1864.

It seems a fair response, as Chambersburg was so often in the line of fire, and New York was not.

Despite the disparaging remarks from their fellow countrymen, the townspeople of Chambersburg resolved to rebuild their town. They asked for—and received—aid from townspeople whose property was not damaged, as well as from other northerners. The need was great. A full month after the burning, the *Valley Spirit* reported, “Everything has changed since the burning. Business is all conducted in little shops and shanties on the back streets, and in out of the way places. . . . One would scarcely suppose that so great a change could take place in a community in so short a time.” The editor pessimistically lamented that, despite a state grant of \$100,000, “The prospects of re-building the town . . . look exceedingly dark just now. . . . The contributions from other places will not amount to much in the way of relieving the many wants of the people. . . . How the people are to live this winter God only knows.”⁶³ Reverend Schneck was much more optimistic, in spite of the fact that the raid had rendered him homeless:

I have not witnessed such an absence of despondent feeling under great trials and sudden reverses of earthly fortune, never such buoyancy and vigor of soul, and even cheerfulness amid accumulated woes and sorrows, as I have during these four weeks of our devastated town. . . . you seldom see a sad or somber countenance on the street. . . . in a general way the sufferers by this wholesale devastation are among the most patient, uncomplaining, cheerful, hopeful people I have ever known. God really seems to have given special grace in a special time of need.⁶⁴

Many outsiders eagerly helped. A Boston newspaper reprinted an article from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, stating that “a train, heavily laden with commissary stores was despatched from this city [Harrisburg] this morning to Chambersburg to relieve the

⁶³ “The Future,” *Valley Spirit*, August 31, 1864.

⁶⁴ Schneck, 38.

present wants of homeless women and children, who now crowd the surrounding fields and woods.”⁶⁵ The same day the editor of *The New York Herald* began his anti-Chambersburg rant, his paper also ran a short note about the contributions Chambersburg’s neighbors were making: “At one town the trains arrived just about dinner time, when there was a general cleaning out of dinners; that is, the people took the dinners which they had prepared for themselves from off the tables and actually sent them away to Chambersburg to help feed the needy there.”⁶⁶ Perhaps the most inspirational view of Chambersburg’s future came from an August 24 article in the *Franklin Repository*: “Dark as is the hour, let us not forget that it has the promise of future prosperity to our town. . . . One and all let us resolve that Chambersburg shall be rebuilt, that her population shall again sit down in prosperity where rebel brutality made withering desolation, and when once resolved upon, the good work will be more than half done.”⁶⁷ The devastation of property had not devastated the people’s spirit and will to continue the war.

The Chambersburg burning created a topic for political debate as well. An article from the *Valley Spirit* in late August reprinted a report from the *Harrisburg Telegraph* that “several citizens of Chambersburg have become insane on account of the loss of their entire effects by the late Rebel fire in that town.” The town’s Democratically-aligned paper saucily replied, “It is true . . . that some of our citizens have been slightly deranged ever since the breaking out of the rebellion, but we are happy to say that they are rapidly recovering and are expected to be sufficiently sane to vote for the nominees of the

⁶⁵ “Sufferings of the Citizens,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, August 1, 1864.

⁶⁶ “Supplies for the Sufferers,” *The New York Herald*, August 3, 1864.

⁶⁷ “The Future of Chambersburg,” *Franklin Repository*, August 24, 1864.

Democratic party at the next election.”⁶⁸ The editor implied their “derangement” caused them to support Abraham Lincoln’s Republican Party, but since they had recovered their sanity, they would vote for the opposition in the upcoming presidential election. Perhaps the fact that they had retained their sense of humor was the best barometer of the town’s health following the devastation.

Northern civilians struggled to find meaning in the destruction of Chambersburg, as people do in such situations. The day after the fire, the *New York Herald* asked,

Is this a wholesale life or death invasion of the North, with the temporary relinquishment of Richmond, in the hope to conquer a peace at Philadelphia? Is it a mere raid? Or is it a more extended attempt at the counter irritant strategy by which in the late advance on Washington the enemy hoped to draw Grant from the James river? . . . We suppose the counter irritant view to be the correct one. We believe that Lee could make this strategy very formidable to the North, and we believe that he could easily overdo it.⁶⁹

People in Pennsylvania or New York--or any northern state, for that matter—could not be certain what the Chambersburg raid portended for their future, whether it was the beginning of a string of Confederate invasions and burnings in the North or an isolated event. Most northerners, though, seemed to sense that they were safe from future attacks.

On August 7, under the title “Curious Fact,” the *New York Herald* related, “Although an enemy is reported upon the border, threatening another raid, still the citizens between here and Harrisburg do not seem to be any more anxious or prepared to arm themselves than they were before Chambersburg was in ruins.”⁷⁰ A Union soldier whose wife had braved the destruction and saved their home in Chambersburg by falsely

⁶⁸ *Valley Spirit*, August 31, 1864.

⁶⁹ “The War in Pennsylvania, Virginia and Georgia,” *The New York Herald*, July 31, 1864.

⁷⁰ “Curious Fact,” *The New York Herald*, August 7, 1864.

claiming to be a widow noted in his diary that his wife was still frightened, “but the raid is over and I am so happy to know there will not soon be another, and that my precious ones are safe and sound.”⁷¹ A continuing sense of security distinguished the experience of northern civilians from that of southern civilians under hard war. By August 1864, southerners who lived in the general vicinity of the Union Army came to *expect* that their homes and personal possessions would be destroyed by the enemy. They may not have anticipated having their roofs burned over their heads, but they knew that their crops, livestock, and foodstuffs were vulnerable and became efficient in hiding valuables as the enemy approached.

Hard war became a more viable policy for the Union Army than it ever did for the Confederates, who spent the vast majority of the war on their own soil and whose only invasions into the North ended in defeat. The burning of Chambersburg, Pennsylvania understandably shocked northerners, and at the time, comments such as “Modern history affords but few parallels of a deed so atrocious and unnecessary,” became commonplace in the North, but in reality, hard war devastated the South far more, simply because of the broad swath of destruction. The newspaper correctly asserted that “similar offences” by Union troops in the Shenandoah Valley were “committed in a smaller degree”;⁷² however, the compound effect of four years of fighting and foraging along with the burning in parts of Virginia made the outcome far worse than in Chambersburg.

⁷¹ Samuel Cormany, *The Cormany Diaries*, 463-464.

⁷² “Burning of the Town,” *The New York Herald*, August 2, 1864.

The Confederate generals who ordered and executed the destruction stoutly defended their decision. Early reportedly made the following comments on August 6, 1864:

General Hunter in his recent raid to Lynchburg, caused wide-spread ruin wherever he passed. I followed him about sixty miles, and language would fail me to describe the terrible desolation which marked his path. . . . Such things of course, cannot be long endured, and must provoke retaliation whenever it is possible. . . . I was very reluctant [to order the burning of Chambersburg], and it was a most disagreeable duty, to inflict such damage on these citizens; but I deemed it an imperative [sic] necessity to show the people of the Federal States that war has two sides.⁷³

McCausland also described the raid as “an act of retaliation perfectly justified by the circumstances,” insisting it “was at all times kept clearly within the rule governing civilized warfare.”⁷⁴ Both sides were testing and revising the rules of “civilized warfare.”

Yet, hard war tactics on northern soil yielded fewer results. McCausland did not receive the compensation he and Early claimed to seek from Chambersburg, and the destruction did not cripple the North’s will to continue fighting. Rather, McCausland’s raid fueled the town’s desire to continue. The *Franklin Repository* responded to the destruction the next day,

There was a time when we believed in the boasted chivalry of the South, when we were proud of their brave deeds, even when we struggled with them, for we looked upon them as misguided *Americans*, but this last wholesale act of vandalism has extinguished every spark of respect for them as men. Let us fight this unholy war to the bitter end, and palsied be the tongue that speaks of peace other than upon the grounds of unconditional submission to the arms of the United States of North America.⁷⁵

⁷³ “A Citizen to the *New York Herald*,” *Valley Spirit*, August 31, 1864.

⁷⁴ M’Causland.

⁷⁵ “Gossip with Our Friends,” *Franklin Repository*, August 31, 1864. Emphasis is present in the original.

General Grant condemned the burning of Chambersburg, “a purely defenceless [sic] town with no garrison whatever, and no fortifications.” The destruction in Pennsylvania seems to have influenced his decision immediately thereafter to appoint General Philip H. Sheridan to command Union forces in the Shenandoah Valley, “with instructions to put himself south of the enemy and follow him to the death. Wherever the enemy goes let our troops go also.”⁷⁶

The burning of Chambersburg, Pennsylvania was a failed, final attempt to expose northern civilians to the horrors of war that had plagued southerners since the war began. Though Early and McCausland assumed the blessing of southern civilians in their brief campaign of revenge and retaliation, many Confederate participants expressed profound regret for the destruction and questioned the results. For the townspeople of Chambersburg—much like their counterparts in Lexington--the fires knocked them down but not out, and their resilience carried them through to a successful conclusion in the war. One prominent resident aptly expressed the spirit that propelled the town into the future, “This wretched war cannot last forever and I have an abiding faith that good old Chambersburg will be in the future, as it has been in the past, the first and best of all places to live.”⁷⁷ Twenty years after the burning, Jacob Hoke reported, “The Chambersburg of to-day, which arose from the ashes of the Chambersburg of the past, as is conceded by all, is the handsomest town of the Cumberland Valley. If it has its equal anywhere in any town of its size, east or west, I have never seen it.”⁷⁸

⁷⁶ *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant* (1885; repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 361.

⁷⁷ G.R. Messersmith Letter, August 20, 1864. Franklin County Historical Society.

⁷⁸ Hoke, 129-130.

Chapter 3: Sheridan's Raid on Dayton

When news of the destruction in Chambersburg reached Rockingham County in the southern Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, the local newspaper expressed concern about reprisals:

[Union soldiers] have burned whole towns; they have burned private residences; they have burned mills; they have burned churches; and even now they are doing their utmost to shell and to burn some of our chief towns. . . . We hope and pray that the burning of Chambersburg may put a stop to burning elsewhere. If it does not, however, we hope the Confederates will again apply the torch.¹

Although the journalist for the *Rockingham Register* could not have known that much of his own county would lie in ashes only two months later, he seemed to sense that the war was changing. The burning of Chambersburg served as a gateway for increased destruction in the South.

By late summer, though, the local press still gloated about the Valley's security. In August, the Lynchburg paper presumed to advise President Lincoln on his war strategy: "The Yankees should quit raiding. They don't pay well for the investment, and are only a temporary inconvenience in one respect, while they are an absolute blessing in intensifying the hatred of the people for the foe who are making war upon us."² Almost one month later, Valley journalists remained optimistic as they assessed their situation, "We are still safe; our means of sustaining life are still abundant; and our gallant soldiers still stand as a wall. . . between us and the meanest, vilest foe that ever disgraced the name of our common humanity. We cannot be too grateful that we have been spared this

¹ John H. Wartmann, "Burning of Chambersburg," *Rockingham Register*, August 12, 1864.

² (Reprinted from the *Lynchburg Republican*), *Rockingham Register*, August 12, 1864.

last cup of suffering and distress prepared for us by the enemy.”³ Residents of the Valley understood that they sat in the war’s path, but they avoided panic because they had confidence in Confederate Lieutenant General Jubal Early and his dwindling army of 14,000 men to protect the agriculturally-rich Valley, his main source of supplies.

In June 1864, newspapers reported optimistically on the coming harvest, “The grass and the grain looks unusually promising, whilst the corn and the fruit trees fairly laugh and clap their hands at the prospects of filling to overflowing the measure of the good of a bounteous and beneficent Providence.”⁴ Yet the vaunted abundance of foodstuffs increased tension within the community by August. Social conflict was not a new phenomenon in Rockingham County in 1864. The large minority of religious, nonslaveholding pacifists who lived and farmed in the region—mostly Quakers, Brethren, and Mennonites—distinguished themselves through the plain dress and conservative social practices they inherited from their Pennsylvania Dutch forebears, but their refusal to serve in the Confederate Army had caused a new rift with their neighbors as soon as the war broke out.

Valley residents who had sent sons and husbands off to fight resented the religious exemption that pacifist church members enjoyed from the government in Richmond, especially since many of the conscientious objectors also supported the Union cause.⁵ As the yearly harvest approached, a contributor to the *Rockingham Register*

³ *Rockingham Register*, September 9, 1864.

⁴ “An Abundant Harvest,” *Rockingham Register*, June 24, 1864.

⁵ Throughout this chapter, the terms “unionist” and “pacifist” may be used almost interchangeably. It is difficult to differentiate between the two within the Anabaptist community, and many members could legitimately claim both labels. After the war, the Southern Claims Commission attempted to identify which claimants were merely pacifists and which were active Unionists, and the commission struggled with this issue as well.

writing under the pseudonym of “Several Who See” accused religious exemptees of inflating prices on food. The article read,

You are professedly a Christian people, and charity—not to speak of humanity—is one of the highest attributes of a Christian. You are rich, and have been abundantly blessed in most all respects. You are too conscientious (religiously) to engage in battle for the freedom and liberty of your country. Is it not curious that you are not too conscientious to ask an hundred fold that worth of your produce?⁶

Newspaper editors boasted about patriotism and Providence, but the community showed the strain of impending invasion.

Meanwhile, Union General Ulysses S. Grant planned to put an end to General Robert E. Lee’s use of the Shenandoah Valley as the “Breadbasket of the Confederacy.” As early as July 14—two weeks before the Confederate destruction of Chambersburg-- Grant wrote a letter to Major General Henry Halleck explaining that Union troops would “eat out Virginia clear and clean as far as they go, so that crows flying over it for the balance of this season will have to carry their provender with them.”⁷ After the burning of Chambersburg on July 30, Grant articulated the details of a significant invasion of the Valley. The destruction in Pennsylvania became the last straw in a series of frustrations that Early had caused the Union Army in the Second Valley Campaign. Although Grant found himself tied down in Petersburg against Lee, he took time to make necessary adjustments to the Union command in the Shenandoah Valley. In his postwar memoirs, Grant explained that Early’s army had been “free to supply themselves with horses, beef

⁶ “To Those Who Are Exempted on Religious Grounds,” *Rockingham Register*, August 12, 1864.

⁷ Grant to Halleck, July 14, 1864, U.S. War Department, *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, vol. 40, pt. III: 223. Cited hereafter as OR; unless otherwise specified, all OR documents are located in Series I.

cattle, and. . . provisions.” Grant wrote, “I determined to put a stop to this. I started Sheridan at once for that field of operation, and on the following day sent another division of his cavalry.”⁸ General Philip Sheridan’s appointment signaled a major change in strategy for the Union Army in the Valley.

Sheridan had served with Grant in the western theatre of the war before both were called east to help defeat Lee. He had earned a reputation as a brave and headstrong officer at Chickamauga, but at only thirty-three years of age, his youth and inexperience concerned Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. Grant nevertheless insisted on his appointment to head the newly-created Middle Military Division, and in early August, Sheridan and his 26,000-man Army of the Shenandoah set out for the Valley of Virginia to take on Early.⁹

Shortly after his promotion, Sheridan received grim orders from his commander. Grant ordered, “Give the enemy no rest. . . . Do all the damage to railroads and crops you can. Carry off stock of all descriptions, and negroes [slaves], so as to prevent further planting. If the war is to last another year, we want the Shenandoah Valley to remain a barren waste.”¹⁰ Grant intended for Sheridan to carry out the plans he had discussed the month before with Halleck and determined to decisively break the Confederate Army through military pressure and the destruction of supplies.

In mid-September, Sheridan defeated Early’s much smaller force at the Third Battle of Winchester and the Battle of Fisher’s Hill on the northern end of the

⁸ *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant* (1885; repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 361.

⁹ *Personal Memoirs of P. H. Sheridan* (1888; repr., New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 254. The OR indicates that Sheridan had over 45,000 men under his command, but only 26,000 were in the Valley proper, able to take the field.

¹⁰ Grant to Sheridan, August 26, 1864, OR, 43, pt. I: 917.

Shenandoah Valley. Early quickly retreated south, and Sheridan followed, prepared to execute Grant's orders to lay waste to the Valley. When Sheridan arrived in the Valley, his men began destroying barns, haystacks, and mills—any supplies that would help feed Early's army—and driving off and slaughtering livestock. Sheridan agreed with Grant's assessment that the Valley had to be destroyed. After the war he wrote, “[Grant] had rightly concluded that it was time to bring the war home to a people engaged in raising crops from a prolific soil to feed the country's enemies. . . . I endorsed the programme [sic] in all its parts.”

In later years, Sheridan reflected on the nature of war itself,

“I do not hold war to mean simply that lines of men shall engage each other in battle. . . . Those who rest at home in peace and plenty see but little of the horrors. . . and even grow indifferent to them. . . . It is another matter, however, when deprivation and suffering are brought to their own doors.

Sheridan echoed Grant's belief that civilian suffering would bring a quicker end to the conflict: “Death is popularly considered the maximum of punishment in war, but it is not; reduction to poverty brings prayers for peace more surely and quickly than does the destruction of human life, as the selfishness of man has demonstrated in more than one great conflict.”¹¹ Sheridan neglected to mention that his enthusiasm for hard war was tempered with great restraint late in the Second Valley Campaign.

In addition to trying to end the war quickly, Sheridan had another reason for stripping the Valley of its food supply: guerillas. Guerillas threatened and harassed the Union Army in the Valley from every direction, and Sheridan's men found it unnerving, many of them mentioning it in their diaries and letters. A Vermont chaplain who served

¹¹ Sheridan, 266-267.

with Sheridan wrote, “The people were meek-faced citizens by day, and in the presence of any considerable body of Union troops; but as soon as the troops were out of sight, when darkness came on, they became desperate and bloodthirsty guerrillas; and in this character they stole upon our men like savages.”¹² The tense situation around Harrisonburg portended disaster for one of the town’s rural outposts.

The tragic and mysterious death of one of Sheridan’s favorite officers exacerbated the destruction the Union Army had begun in Rockingham County. Lieutenant John Rodgers Meigs had earned respect as a seasoned army veteran by October 1864. The twenty-three-year-old son of the Union Army’s Quartermaster General Montgomery C. Meigs entered the army in 1863 after graduating first in his class at West Point. Serving with General David Hunter in the Lexington Raid in June 1864, Meigs left his youthful mark on Virginia Military Institute by vandalizing the debating society’s book and capturing the school’s statue of Washington. Meigs later served as the chief engineer of the Department of West Virginia and had become a valuable asset as an expert on the Valley’s topography. On August 15, Sheridan selected him to be one of his aide-de-camps.¹³ He later described Meigs as “gallant” and said he “was endeared to me on account of his invaluable knowledge of the country, his rapid sketching, his great intelligence, and his manly and soldierly qualities.”¹⁴ Sheridan’s admiration of young Meigs explains much of what occurred that October outside Harrisonburg.

¹² Chaplain E.M. Haynes, “Tenth Vermont” Letter, Civil War File, Harrisonburg-Rockingham Historical Society, Dayton, VA.

¹³ General Orders, No. 12, August 15, 1864, OR, 43, pt. I: 800.

¹⁴ Sheridan, February 3, 1866, OR, 43, pt. I: 56-57. Sheridan’s official report on the 1864 Shenandoah Valley Campaign was written almost a year after the war ended.

On October 3, Meigs and two other Union soldiers, William Cutterson and James A. Garrington, conducted a reconnaissance near Dayton, a rural village five miles south of Harrisonburg, where many of Rockingham County's Unionists lived. Meigs and his companions encountered three men on horseback who were wearing black oilcloths in the early evening drizzle, making it difficult to identify them. The details of what occurred next varied according to the source. The Confederate version held that the three unknown horsemen were in fact Confederate scouts George Martin and F. M. Campbell of the Fourth Virginia Cavalry and Benjamin Franklin ("Frank") Shaver of the First Virginia Cavalry.

According to sources closely connected to Shaver, the Confederate soldiers saw three Union soldiers approach on horseback. When one of the men suggested outpacing them, Shaver, who was less than a mile from his home, replied, "No, by our riding leisurely along they may take us for citizens and not follow us up this road." Shaver remembered a gap in the fence up ahead and suggested riding through it to the woods to evade the enemy. When the Union soldiers followed them onto Swift Run Gap Road, they sped up to get through the gap but found that it was closed. "Campbell asked, 'Shall we run or fight?' Shaver replied, 'Fight.'" When the Union cavalymen reached them, they "challenged them as d---d rebels, to surrender. The Confederates immediately wheeled, and each party fired almost simultaneously." Shaver struggled to gain control of his mare, and as she "darted past" Meigs, Shaver shot him in the head with his pistol at

close range, killing him instantly. The Confederate trio captured a second man, and the third escaped on foot.¹⁵

Unfortunately, Sheridan received a very different report about Meigs' death. With Meigs dead and one companion captured, Cutterson returned alone to headquarters and reported that the scouting party had been ambushed by guerillas who had killed Meigs in cold blood.¹⁶ Sheridan reported to Grant, "Lieut. John R. Meigs, my engineer officer, was murdered beyond Harrisonburg, near Dayton. For this atrocious act all the houses within an area of five miles were burned." He explained, "Since I came into the Valley, from Harper's Ferry up to Harrisonburg, every train, every small party, and every straggler has been bushwhacked by people, many of whom have protection papers from commanders who have been hitherto in this valley."¹⁷ In his 1888 memoirs, Sheridan continued to insist that Meigs' death was the work of guerillas:

[Meigs] overtook three men dressed in our uniform. From their dress, and also because the party was immediately behind our lines and within a mile and a half of my headquarters, Meigs and his assistants naturally thought that they were joining friends, and wholly unsuspecting of anything to the contrary, rode on with the three men some little distance; but their perfidy was abruptly discovered by their suddenly turning upon Meigs with a call for his surrender. . . . one of the topographers. . . reported a few minutes later at my headquarters that Meigs was killed without resistance of any kind whatever, and without even the chance to give himself up. . . . The fact that the murder had been committed inside our lines was evidence that the perpetrators of the crime, having their homes in the vicinity, had been clandestinely visiting them, and been secretly harbored by some of the neighboring residents.¹⁸

¹⁵ "The Meigs Episode: How the Federal Lieutenant Came to Be Killed by Frank Shaver," *Yost's Weekly*, December 16, 1895. This article appears to be reprinted from the *Rockingham Register*, date unknown.

¹⁶ A private investigator hired by the Meigs family after the war interviewed Cutterson and described his account of Meigs' death as "confused...& in fact he seems to have run at the first moment and did not see much." Quoted in *A Civil War Soldier of Christ and Country: The Selected Correspondence of John Rodgers Meigs, 1859-64*, ed., Mary A. Giunta (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 249.

¹⁷ Sheridan to Grant, October 7, 1864, OR, Series I, vol. 43, pt. I: 30.

¹⁸ Sheridan, 308.

When news of Meigs' "murder" reached Union soldiers back at the camp, they mourned in shock at the loss of the popular officer. Sheridan seemed particularly devastated by both the death of young Meigs and the manner in which he died. Guerilla activity was a serious matter, and Sheridan promptly ordered the burning of every house in a five mile radius of the spot where Meigs fell. He explained his motives after the war,

Determining to teach a lesson to these abettors of the foul deed—a lesson they would never forget—I ordered all the houses within an area of five miles to be burned. General Custer, who had succeeded to the command of the Third Cavalry division. . . was charged with this duty, and the next morning proceeded to put the order into execution.¹⁹

The officer on whose shoulders the order fell was Lieutenant Colonel Thomas F. Wildes of the 116th Ohio Volunteer Infantry. Wildes had served under General David Hunter in Lexington during the June raid and had criticized Hunter for the vandalism of Washington College—though not for the burning of Virginia Military Institute.²⁰ Despite—or perhaps because of—their previous experience with hard war, many of the men expressed dismay over their new orders.

One of the men involved was Chaplain Louis Napoleon Beaudry of the 5th New York Cavalry. Beaudry recorded in his August 4 diary entry, "I have looked upon the most awful tragic scenes I ever witnessed." Beaudry accompanied his regiment in the burning of Dayton, though he "pleaded to be relieved" from the distasteful assignment, confiding, "When I heard the work we had to do, I was heartsick!" He reported that one officer was arrested for his refusal to participate. Beaudry described the scene,

¹⁹ Sheridan, 308.

²⁰ Thomas F. Wildes, *Record of the One Hundred and Sixteenth Regiment Ohio Infantry Volunteers in the War of the Rebellion* (Sandusky, OH: I. F. Mack & Bro., 1884), 103-105. Wildes' work appears to have been completed by another member in his unit because he died before finishing. It is unclear in some passages whether Wildes or his ghostwriter penned the words.

Flanking columns were sent out into the country, burning everything they found, while the main column passed on the Pike, announcing the terrible news to the panic-stricken people. The horror that prevails cannot be imagined nor described. Two hours were given the villagers to get out of their houses and the column marched toward Harrisonburg, burning all buildings as we went. . . . More or less pillaging went on during the terrible carnival.²¹

Another cavalryman, Captain Charles (“C.T.”) Van Dusen of the 8th New York Cavalry, expressed similar apprehension over the unit’s orders. In his diary entry of the same date, he briefly noted, “Burning all the buildings within 5 miles of Dayton. Burning in retaliation for Lieut. Shot last Evg. [evening] by bushwhacker.” Van Dusen poignantly concluded, “Terrible sorry sight to see all buildings burning & women crying. It is inhuman.”²² In spite of the soldiers’ belief that guerillas had killed Meigs, they did not agree that all of the neighboring civilians should pay the price.

Union soldiers stationed in the vicinity who did not participate in the destruction also provided commentary on the burning, largely criticizing Sheridan’s orders. Future president Rutherford B. Hayes served as a colonel under Sheridan in the 23rd Ohio, and, like many of his comrades in arms, he had been with Hunter in the Lexington raid, criticizing the destruction there in June. Along with Van Dusen and Beaudry, he also mentioned the burning in his October 4th diary, but unlike the previous diarists, he did not participate directly—and the date happened to be his forty-second birthday. He wrote, “Lieutenant Meigs killed last night by guerillas, three miles south of camp. Houses on the road for five miles burned by order of General Sheridan.” He discreetly concluded,

²¹ *War Journal of Louis N. Beaudry, Fifth New York Cavalry: The Diary of a Union Chaplain, Commencing February 16, 1863*, Edited by Richard E. Beaudry (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1996), 175.

²² Charles Theron Van Dusen, “Van Dusen Civil War Diary,” *New York Times*, July 22, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2011/07/24/nyregion/20110724-van-dusen-civil-war-diary.html?ref=nyregion> (accessed February 14, 2013). This recent article contains a transcription of Van Dusen’s diary.

“Not according to my views or feelings.”²³ Hayes chose his words carefully, but he still managed to reveal his opinion of the destruction.

Others wrote home about their experiences. Colonel Charles Russell Lowell of the 2nd Massachusetts Cavalry came from a prominent Boston family. Writing to his young wife from nearby Mt. Crawford on October 5, he described the scene the night before:

[The new moon and the evening star] looked very strangely calm and peaceful and almost reproachful in the West. . . with the whole North and East, far and near, lighted up by burning barns and houses. Lieutenant Meigs was shot by a guerrilla, and by order the village of Dayton and everything for several miles around was burned. I am very glad my Brigade had no hand in it. . . . The war in this part of the country is becoming very unpleasant to an officer’s feelings.²⁴

Although these men had witnessed the effects of hard war before and though they sought an end to guerilla activity, they struggled with the destruction of private property, even at this late phase of the war. The Union’s hard war policies seemed to be inflicting damage on its army’s morale.

The destruction could have been far worse, as the burning of Dayton ended almost as abruptly as it had begun. Sheridan mentioned the sudden turn of events in his memoirs, “When a few houses in the immediate neighborhood of the scene of the murder had been burned, Custer was directed to cease his desolating work, but to fetch away all the able-bodied males as prisoners.”²⁵ Why were Major-General George Custer and his 3rd Cavalry Division ordered to stop burning homes in Dayton? The answer lies with

²³ *Diary and Letters of Rutherford Birchard Hayes: Nineteenth President of the United States, Vol. II: 1861-1865*, ed. Charles Richard Williams (1922; repr., New York: Kraus Reprint Company, 1971), 522.

²⁴ *Life and Letters of Charles Russell Lowell*, ed. Edward W. Emerson (1907; repr., Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1971), 352-353. Lowell was mortally wounded in his unit’s next major engagement, the Battle of Cedar Creek on October 19, 1864, and died the following day.

²⁵ Sheridan, 308.

Wildes. When he received orders to burn houses in the area, he immediately sent a courier to Sheridan with a message in which Wildes “urged and begged him to revoke the order in so far as Dayton was concerned” because of “the character of the people of the place”—in other words, because they were largely Unionists and religious pacifists. Sheridan “read the note and swore, read it again and swore, examined and cross examined the messenger.” He reluctantly cancelled the order to burn the village.

Wildes explained that Sheridan

was in great grief over the death of his staff officer, and terribly determined that the people of the vicinity should suffer for his murder, for he well knew. . . that these bushwhacking murderers were not men of the rebel army, but cowardly citizens who, remaining within our lines, assembled together to commit such dastardly deeds as this at unguarded spots.²⁶

The townspeople’s loyalty to the Union saved their homes and not the discovery of facts surrounding Meigs’ death. For years after the war, Montgomery C. Meigs believed that guerillas had murdered his son, even hiring a private detective to investigate. The 1895 article in *Yost’s Weekly* detailing Shaver’s account of the shooting noted that “efforts were made after the war to arrest Shaver on the charge of bushwhacking Lieut. Meigs. And it was only after satisfactory evidence had been furnished that he was regularly enrolled in the Confederate army, and was at the time acting under military orders, that he was left unmolested.”²⁷

While Sheridan considered whether to revoke the order, soldiers remained unaware of the turn of events and notified residents of the order to burn their homes,

²⁶ Wildes, 191.

²⁷ “The Meigs Episode: How the Federal Lieutenant Came to Be Killed by Frank Shaver,” *Yost’s Weekly*, December 16, 1895. *Yost’s Weekly* was published in Staunton, Virginia.

urging them to remove personal items to safety. Wildes remembered the scene long after the war had ended,

Such weeping and wailing as went up from the poor women and children of that town we hope never to hear again. . . . The soldiers had helped the people carry out their goods. . . . Every house was now emptied, and the poor people sat among their little piles of household effects, the very picture of despair, awaiting the hour when their houses should be given up to the flames. In the country all about them, the dense smoke now arising in all directions showed them that the vengeful order was being executed.²⁸

News eventually arrived that the original order had been rescinded, and Union soldiers sought out the citizens to share the good news and “help them carry back their goods. When they saw them coming, they thought it was to apply the torch, and the screams of women and children were perfectly heart rending.”²⁹

When the would-be victims discovered that their homes would remain safe, “many of the poor women fainted,” and the children clapped their hands and shouted for joy. Wildes remembered that the tidal wave of emotion “was too much for even the grim and sturdy old soldiers. The sleeve of many a blouse was wet with their tears.” The soldiers gladly helped the townspeople return household goods to their rightful places, and the citizens of Dayton prepared a feast for the soldiers who would be moving out the next day. Wildes wrote, “There was not a man in the regiment who would not have faced death in a dozen battles rather than to have burned that village in the presence of those weeping, imploring and helpless women and children.”³⁰ Wildes’ postwar memories may have exaggerated the emotion of the moment. However, the fact that many diaries and letters from Union soldiers written at the time of the burning described dramatic

²⁸ Wildes, 191.

²⁹ Wildes, 192.

³⁰ Wildes, 192.

scenes and denounced Sheridan's orders supports the overall message of Wildes' account. The battle-hardened veterans of the Army of the Shenandoah desired to root out guerillas and end the war quickly, but they did not relish destroying the property of defenseless women in order to accomplish the feat.

The *Rockingham Register* later reported that Sheridan's Raid, including the order to burn Dayton for Meigs' death, resulted in the burning of 30 houses and 450 barns, in addition to the destruction of 31 mills and 100 miles of fencing. A special committee appointed by the county court estimated that 100,000 bushels of wheat and 50,000 bushels of corn had been destroyed and that over 10,000 head of livestock—including cattle, horses, sheep, and hogs--had been "carried off," though many of those were doubtless slaughtered, according to eyewitness accounts. These staggering losses represented Rockingham County alone. The committee estimated that the total damages in the county amounted to \$25.5 million in Confederate prices.³¹ Destruction occurred on two different levels and under two different sets of orders. The larger "burning"—as the locals came to call it—resulted from Grant's August orders to Sheridan, while specific destruction, including that of houses, generally stemmed from retaliation to guerilla attacks. As eyewitnesses recorded the events that unfolded that autumn, they often conflated the various incidents. Indeed, to civilians who watched their barns and homes burn and to soldiers who had to execute such orders, one burning hardly differed from another, especially in postwar memory.³²

³¹ "Rockingham's Losses," *Rockingham Register*, November 11, 1864.

³² This poses a difficult task for the historian seeking to untangle the events and treat them separately. Here, every effort has been made to identify which "burning" is being described.

Sheridan's reluctant recall of the burning order saved countless homes from destruction, yet even before the new orders reached troops to cease the burning, many soldiers took it upon themselves to protect property. John J. Garber was a Brethren church member who strongly opposed the war and undermined the Confederate Army by assisting deserters. At one point, he successfully bribed his own brother into leaving the Confederate Army. During the raid, "Genl. Custer gave him protection so that his property was not burned though his neighbors [sic] property was."³³ Custer likely identified Garber as a Unionist and determined to save his property in recognition of his loyalty to the Union.

A similar incident occurred while fourteen-year-old George Edgar Sipe was at a neighbor's house during the raid. Sheridan's men rode in and set fire to the family's barn and outbuildings. When one soldier came into an upstairs bedroom and set fire to a bed, the daughters ran outside "screaming and wringing their hands." An officer rode by and "hearing their cries and pitiful appeals, he sprang from his horse and rushing up to the room plunged the point of his sword into the burning faggot and ashed it over the porch banisters down into the yard. Then hastily dragging out the burning bed tick and coverings, he threw them down on the wet grass." Sipe noted the family's appreciation; they "couldn't say enough in praise of the officer who had saved the house over their heads. Lucy. . . in a burst of gratitude, had hardly dried her eyes before declaring that she 'would love that Yankee as long as she lived.'"³⁴ The people of Dayton were fortunate that the Union Army had camped in the area for over a week before Meigs' death because

³³ David S. Rodes and Norman R. Wenger, *Unionists and the Civil War Experience in the Shenandoah Valley, Volume III* (Dayton, VA: Valley Research Associates, 1995), 433. Rodes and Wenger's work is a transcribed compilation of the Southern Claims Commission Records from the 1870s.

³⁴ George Edgar Sipe, "Civil War Recollections," Civil War Files, Harrisonburg-Rockingham Historical Society, Dayton, VA.

it gave Union soldiers like Wildes the opportunity to interact with people in the community. They were then able to vouch for their loyalty when Sheridan gave the order to burn; Hayes had referred to the “Dunkards [Brethren] and Mennonites” as “good, quiet people.”³⁵ Soldiers also found it difficult to destroy the property of people they had come to know—and respect.

The greatest restraint in the use of hard war in Dayton and the surrounding county ultimately came from Sheridan himself when he supplied wagons to transport refugees out of the Valley, even as the destruction was being carried out. Mennonite Peter Hartman recalled his experiences as a young man in the Valley in 1864, and his personal account demonstrated the seemingly incongruous events that occurred simultaneously. Later in life he wrote, “We just began to realize what war was when Sheridan made his raid.” Seeing soldiers coming up the Valley Pike, Hartman hurried home and saw “the whole farm was overrun with soldiers shooting the stock. We had thirty fat hogs, and they were all killed, we thought, by the time I got home.” The family also lost their chickens and sheep. Hartman reported that “some of the people tried to ward off the attack by saying that they were Union men. To this Sheridan answered that all was Union now.”³⁶ The Hartmans’ property was not spared, even though they were pacifists.

Despite the loss, though, Hartman noted that Sheridan “sent word out all over the country that if any one wanted to leave the country and go north he would send teams out after them.” Hartman joined the wagon train heading north to avoid serving in either army since he had successfully dodged Confederate conscription up to that point. He

³⁵ Hayes, 519. This reference comes from a letter to his wife on October 1, 1864. Most of Sheridan’s army had been in the Harrisonburg area since September 25, 1864.

³⁶ Peter S. Hartman, “Reminiscences of the Civil War,” in *Life of Peter S. Hartman*, H.A. Brunk, ed. (Hartman Family, 1937), 64-68.

described the wagon train as having 1,600 wagons, “sixteen miles long.” The wagon train went as far as Martinsburg, West Virginia, ninety miles north, and from there, Valley refugees had to make their own arrangements.³⁷ Hartman’s estimate of the number of evacuee wagons must have been exaggerated, as it was not corroborated in other accounts. Sheridan himself reported to Grant, “Over 400 wagon loads of refugees have been sent back to Martinsburg.”³⁸ Sheridan’s actual orders pertaining to the wagon train are not extant, so it is difficult to discern the parameters for evacuation. Wagons were certainly offered to local residents verified as Unionists and may have been supplied to anyone wishing to leave.

Evidence that the Union Army was generous in its provisions for refugees emerged from the reminiscences of seventy-six-year-old Susie Swank. Swank was only thirteen, living in Dayton with her widowed mother and four sisters when Sheridan’s Raid occurred; four of her brothers were away with the Confederate Army, indicating the family was neither pacifist nor unionist. When Union soldiers rode up to the house, her mother gave them bread, and on a second visit, they asked for meat. “She said she had only a small piece, hardly half of a ham,” Swank remembered. “She gave it to them and they paid her for it and thanked her. And then they told her would have to leave the home as they were expecting a little scrimmage.” The women packed up a few food

³⁷Hartman.

³⁸ Sheridan to Grant, October 7, 1864, OR 43, pt. II: 308. Sheridan’s actual orders pertaining to the wagon train are not located in the OR, so it is difficult to discern the parameters for evacuation. Wagons may have been supplied to anyone wishing to leave.

items and left without knowing where they would go. A Union soldier directed them toward the refugee wagon train.³⁹

When one of the wagon masters, also a Union officer, saw that the family of women had been displaced, he “spoke to the soldiers that were with him: ‘Come boys, we will get for this lady what we can.’” The wagon master drove the women back to their home with two wagons and ordered his men to quickly fill her mother’s chest with household goods and clothing. Swank recalled that her sister saved all of her dresses, “but the rest of us got not any except what we had on our backs at the time.” They also took “two feather beds.” The “scrimmage” began, and the group of women and soldiers hurried back to the wagon train in Harrisonburg. Swank described it as “a long wagon train that General Sheridan sent up the valley to take all the women and children out of the valley. All that would go they took and there were more than 900 wagons and 800 soldiers went along as guards.”⁴⁰ Like Hartman, Swank overestimated the number of wagons, but the large number both cited reveals how impressive the wagon train must have looked to the young people.

Swank’s family took their first locomotive ride ever to Dayton, Ohio. A man in the depot “came in and asked ‘Is there anyone from Dayton, or Bridgewater, Virginia? If so please stand up.’” The man had lived close to Swank’s home in Dayton, though the family had not met him before. He took them to his house to spend the night and then took them to their train the next morning as they made their way to an uncle in Bellefontaine, Ohio, showing that Valley residents who had previously evacuated

³⁹ Susie Swank, “Recalls General Phil Sheridan’s Raid in Shenandoah Valley, and Visit of Soldiers in Her Home,” *The Daily Examiner*, Bellefontaine, OH, November 11, 1927. Transcript located in Harrisonburg-Rockingham Historical Society, Dayton, VA.

⁴⁰ Swank.

actively sought to help former neighbors. Three members of the family remained in Virginia, but the rest stayed in Ohio, and Swank lived in Ohio the rest of her life.⁴¹ Swank's story demonstrates that Sheridan extended relocation services to women and children, at least a few of those whose families actively supported the Confederacy.

Some of the most gripping stories came from pacifists who left the Valley to settle in other Mennonite communities. Most Mennonite and Brethren families who left relocated—either permanently or temporarily—to Lancaster, Pennsylvania and eastern Ohio where they could worship with other parishes and continue farming as they had done in Rockingham County. The *Herald of Truth*, a monthly Mennonite newspaper based in Ohio, carried news of fellow believers who had become refugees in the war. A man in Washington County, Maryland reported in November 1864, “A great many [brethren] have come over within the last few weeks. Some have been entirely burnt out by the soldiers—Some have saved a few things, and some bring their families with them.”⁴² Evacuees brought stories of the devastation with them.

Refugees themselves also submitted letters describing the nightmare they had left behind in Virginia. Michael Shank of Dayton reported that “prowlers, contrary to the General's [Sheridan's] orders, commenced pilfering robbing and plundering. . . squads of them. . . taking whatever suited their fancy, such as money, watches, jewelry. . . threaten[ing] [sic] to shoot the inmates of the house if they followed after them.” The Shank family acquired wagons to load their household goods, but they were unable to save everything. They made their way to Harrisonburg and waited for the wagon train to

⁴¹ Swank.

⁴² “Extracts from a Letter,” *Herald of Truth*, November 1864.

leave. Shank reported that when he went home to check on his property, he “found the destruction completed; the dwelling house, and barn with all their contents and all the out buildings were entirely consumed by the flames. The U.S. Government then furnished us transportation, free of charge to Lancaster, Pa., and we are now here, living principally upon the charities of the brethren.”⁴³ Shank discovered the difficult truth that leaving home to seek shelter elsewhere left property more vulnerable. Soldiers seemed to find it far more difficult to burn homes when they had to look the victims in the face than if the house was unoccupied. Despite the destruction, Mennonite accounts generally praised Sheridan as Shank did and refused to blame him for the destruction to their property.

Like Shank, fellow Mennonite Emanuel Suter temporarily relocated to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania after the burning. In December 1864, though, Suter had no clear direction for the future. To the readers of the *Herald of Truth* he wrote, “I . . . left the once beautiful, but now desolate valley of Virginia, and am now living in this County as a pilgrim and a stranger not knowing where I shall next pitch my tent, or when I shall be able to go to my home again.” Suter mourned the separation from friends as well as from home: “This has caused me no little trouble and distress, to be separated from near and dear friends, brethren and sisters, so that we do not know whether we shall ever be able to see each other anymore in this world or not.” He went on to write that he was subscribing to the paper to “see where all my brethren and sisters are, who have left the valley.”⁴⁴ The paper became a lifeline for a community that had been ripped apart by war. This was especially important for the Mennonites, who had been a close-knit

⁴³ “A Letter,” *Herald of Truth*, December 1864.

⁴⁴ “A Letter from Lancaster Co., Pa.,” *Herald of Truth*, December 1864.

community united by farming and worship and who were now scattered for the foreseeable future.

Mennonite pastor D. H. Landis echoed Suter's grief over the loss of community. Landis and his family relocated on October 2, just days before the burning occurred. He described the sudden change that the rural county had experienced in a private letter that was eventually published, "We were, for the last four years, living in a somewhat disturbed and uneasy state of mind. . . in consequence of the national calamity that is now existing." He wrote that "the calamity grew severer" and the church found it difficult to worship: "Some of our churches were destroyed so that we could not convene." Before he left, "the union army came up the Valley, sweeping every thing before them like a wild hurricane: there was nothing left to eat for man or beast; neither was there any thing needed for beasts, as they left no beast from the horse down to the chicken: all was taken." Despite the physical hardship, Landis worried about his congregation,

O, how it grieves me to think of the brethren and sisters that are left back, who also have a desire to come out of the troubles that are there! . . . To think of the empty seats that are occasioned by many of us leaving, is painful; to think of it that when they meet to worship and find many of their fellow worshipers absent; but they have my heart and my prayer.⁴⁵

The entire Mennonite community felt the burden of exile and separation, a burden that had ironically been brought about by a war in which they wanted no part.

Mennonites in the North empathized with the plight of their southern church members. A report on "Our Brethren in Virginia," published in November 1864, applauded Sheridan for the escort he had provided the unionist refugees but noted, "as soon as they had left, all their remaining property, buildings &c., were burned to prevent

⁴⁵ D. H. Landis Letter, *Herald of Truth*, December 1864.

the rebel army from finding further shelter or sustenance. One man saw his own buildings wrapped in flames before he had left.” The author—not a victim himself—commiserated with the refugees,

It is scarcely possible for us to imagine the feelings of any one as he turns his back to his home, under military orders, to seek a home among strangers, and as he departs beholds his pathway illuminated by the devouring flames that make his home, a heap of smouldering ruins. Although it is not supposed that these people will permanently lose anything as the government will pay them for all the property they have thus destroyed. . . at the present time they are nearly all left in very destitute circumstances.⁴⁶

The Mennonites and Brethren of the Valley discovered that even after the war, the battle for restitution of destroyed property was a fight they could not avoid. Thirty homes in Rockingham County were destroyed under Sheridan’s orders, and seventeen residents of Dayton proper filed claims with the Southern Claims Commission that heard cases in the 1870s. Claimants, though, could only ask restitution for items—mostly livestock, forage, and foodstuffs—that members of the regular Union Army confiscated under orders; buildings and homes did not qualify. Furthermore, petitioners had to prove they were Unionists, not simply pacifists, and that they had not voted in favor of secession in 1861; this stipulation disqualified many claims, as the community had threatened suspected Unionists and forced their compliance.

Southern newspapers raged against the destruction in the Valley, and many compared Dayton to Chambersburg, where over 200 homes had been destroyed by Confederate troops in July 1864. The *Lynchburg Virginian* asked, “Can these counterfeits of humanity—who would include all of our people—the innocent and the

⁴⁶ “Our Brethren in Virginia,” *Herald of Truth*, November 1864.

guilty—if guilt attach to any—in one common ruin, have any of the milk of human kindness in their breasts?” Even more boldly, the editor asked, “Can any man amongst us say now that McCausland burnt a house too many at Chambersburg?” The article concluded with threats of further retaliation, “We hope that when our army again gets into Pennsylvania, it will leave a black belt of desolation. . . . We are not responsible for the turn the war has taken, and will stand guiltless in the sight of angels and men of the excesses to which we may be provoked.”⁴⁷ The cries of injustice against civilians had grown more vociferous over the course of the campaign.

The *Vindicator*, published twenty miles south of Dayton in Staunton, depicted Grant and Sheridan as cowards for waging war on defenseless civilians:

Now Grant, wearied and sick of fighting the veterans of lee with no avail, has turned his arms against the women and children of our land, hoping, doubtless, that he may gain a glorious victory (!) over them, a result already discovered by him impossible to be attained over the former.

The paper promised that those made destitute by the ruin of their homes and farms would have “retribution.” The author warned, “Let not the North then cry out that Southern Barbarians are let loose upon them, but remember that we can point to the campaigns in the Valley of the Shenandoah for precedents for all the acts our soldiery may commit and a full off set to which will be necessary to make retribution justice.”⁴⁸ Each successive burning seemed to set off new warnings of impending justice through retaliation.

Surprisingly, some southerners proved unsympathetic to the residents of Dayton. One area newspaper that demonstrated the least sympathy for the people of Dayton was the *Lexington Gazette*. Lexington had itself been the victim of a destructive Union raid in

⁴⁷ “A Brutal Order,” *Lynchburg Virginian*, October 12, 1864.

⁴⁸ “Retribution Will Come,” *The Vindicator*, October 21, 1864.

June, yet the editor took perverse pleasure in the destruction sixty miles to the north. The editor wrote, “In the general destruction visited by Sheridan, upon the farmers of the Valley, a crumb of comfort is afforded in the fact, that a few of them belonged to individuals known as extortioners. Some portion of this number happened to consist of prudent, pacific, and close-fisted Dutchmen.”⁴⁹ The Lexington paper echoed the sentiments expressed by the Rockingham paper weeks that accused Mennonites of overcharging for foodstuffs. The *Lynchburg Virginian* did not go quite so far as to celebrate the religious objectors’ loss, but it did note, “Several of the lower class of citizens from Harrisonburg and vicinity migrated with the Yankees, together with most of the free negroes in the Valley. Good citizens rejoice at their departure.”⁵⁰ Many Valley residents who did not belong to the pacifist congregations were relieved at the exodus of their Anabaptist neighbors, given the long history of cultural misunderstanding and political disagreement within the community.

Confederate officers who had supported the destruction of Chambersburg with ambivalence were appalled at the general devastation in the northern valley. Major General John B. Gordon expressed dismay over the larger burning campaign in the Valley. In his postwar memoirs, he wrote, “With barns and mills and implements for tilling the soil all gone, with cattle, sheep, and every animal that furnished food to the helpless inmates carried off, they were dismal abodes of hunger, of hopelessness, and of almost measureless woe.” The destruction was so great that Gordon could not fathom that Grant could have ordered Sheridan to carry out the drastic orders. Gordon optimistically—but incorrectly—surmised,

⁴⁹ “From the Valley,” *Lexington Gazette*, October 19, 1864.

⁵⁰ “From the Valley,” *Lynchburg Virginian*, October 17, 1864.

It is impossible to believe that it could have been approved by President Lincoln, whose entire life, whose every characteristic, was a protest against needless oppression and cruelty. . . . I recall no act of General Grant in the immediate conduct of his campaigns that would indicate his disposition to bring upon any people such sweeping desolation.⁵¹

Confederate soldiers saw the burning of the Shenandoah Valley as a new phase of the war, one that brought greater levels of destruction than they had previously witnessed.

Similarly, Lieutenant Henry Kyd Douglas described Sheridan's orders to burn Dayton as "a holocaust upon [Meigs'] tomb." Douglas remained bitter years after the war about the destruction he witnessed in the wake of Sheridan's general orders to destroy the Valley's provisions: "Did it not occur to either of them [Grant and Sheridan], after their smile over the sardonic joke had faded, that the women and children of Virginia were more to be pitied than crows, for with no rations to eat at home, they had no wings to fly away for food and refuge?" Douglas poetically described riding "beneath great columns of smoke which almost shut out the sun by day, and, in the red glare of bonfires, which, all across that Valley, poured out flames and sparks heavenward and crackled mockingly in the night air." He claimed that he "saw mothers and maidens tearing their hair and shrieking to Heaven in their fright and despair, and little children, voiceless and tearless in their pitiable terror." Douglas' descriptions of the destruction match the flowery, perhaps exaggerated, language of many postwar memoirs, and he claimed to record his own memories because "General Grant in his *Memoirs* passes over this work as if he could not bear to touch it, and. . . no reputable historian of the North has ventured to tell the truth about it and defend it, for it is an insult to civilization and to

⁵¹ John Brown Gordon, *Reminiscences of the Civil War* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904), 304.

God to pretend that the Laws of War justify such warfare.”⁵² Douglas was correct in his assertion that Grant did not discuss the destruction of the Valley in his memoirs, but why he did not is unknown. Grant was in Petersburg at the time, and his *Memoirs* generally focused on his personal experiences.

Douglas’ fellow Confederate officer Major General Thomas L. Rosser followed Sheridan’s path of destruction in early September, before Meigs’ death. His memoirs paint a scene of unimaginable destruction, “The barns, mills, stacks of wheat, oats, shocks of corn and in many instances the dwelling houses, wherein were sheltered only defenseless women and little children, had all been set on fire by the order of the commander of the Federal troops.” When Rosser’s men engaged the enemy, the battle became personal because, Rosser explained, “It was the homes of the men of my brigade that were being given to the flames by Sheridan, and the fierceness of their attack [on the enemy] showed me the bitterness of their hatred of the wretches who were thus destroying their homes.” Rosser blamed Sheridan alone for the devastation, noting that the Union prisoners he captured “were brave, good men and were blameless. . . for they only did as they were ordered. Every prisoner seemed heartily ashamed that such cowardly means had been employed in the endeavor to crush a brave people who never declined battle.”⁵³ Like Douglas, Rosser’s postwar account aimed partly to justify what would come to be known as the “Lost Cause” of the Confederacy and his own role in the war. Regardless, the details provided by Douglas and Rosser do not appreciably contradict Union soldiers’ accounts.

⁵² Henry Kyd Douglas, *I Rode with Stonewall* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 315-316.

⁵³ Thomas L. Rosser, *Riding with Rosser*, edited by S. Roger Keller (Shippensburg, PA: Burd Street Press, 1997), 45-46.

One corroborating account came from Union diarist Wilbur Fisk, who served in Rockingham County that fateful autumn as a private in the 2nd Vermont Volunteers. His October 4th diary entry noted the effects of war on the civilian population, describing Harrisonburg as “a pretty place once. . . but now, like almost all of these Southern cities and villages, bearing abundant evidence of the paralyzing effect of war.” He surmised that hard war was breaking the southern will to continue fighting, “Many. . . are heartily praying for peace, let it come in what way it will. They have tasted the bitter fruit of secession, and have had enough of it.” Fisk predicted that southern suffering would soon bring an end to the conflict, “They see the grim determination of the North and they begin to feel that to hold out longer is to fight against the inevitable destiny.”⁵⁴ Fisk’s conclusions differed wildly from those of the local newspapers that promised continued retaliation for the destruction.

Union Army surgeon Alexander Neil echoed Fisk’s belief that hard war achieved peace. Writing to his parents from Harrisonburg on October 5, he reported, “We are burning and destroying everything in this valley, such as wheat stacks, hay stacks, barns, houses. Indeed, there will be nothing but heaps of ashes and ruins generally between Staunton and Harper’s Ferry.” He also noted, “Thousands of Refugees are fleeing north daily, as nothing but starvation would stare them in the face to stay in this valley the coming winter. They express themselves as heartily tired of the war and now fully realize that Secession has been a dear thing to them.”⁵⁵ Neil may have reported the refugees’ feelings accurately, but many of those who left were Unionists and had never

⁵⁴ *Hard Marching Every Day: The Civil War Letters of Private Wilbur Fisk, 1861-1865*, Emil and Ruth Rosenblatt, eds. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 260-262.

⁵⁵ *Alexander Neil and the Last Shenandoah Valley Campaign: Letters of an Army Surgeon to His Family, 1864*, ed. Richard R. Duncan (Shippensburg, PA: White Mane Publishing, 1996), 68.

enthusiastically supported the war or secession. Gauging the wider community's will to continue fighting is a far more difficult task that continues to be debated by historians studying Confederate nationalism.

Sheridan's report to Grant on October 7 tallied the damages his army had inflicted so far in the entire Shenandoah Valley, not just Rockingham County: We have destroyed "over 2,000 barns, filled with wheat, hay, and farming implements; over 70 mills, filled with flour and wheat. . . over 4[,000] head of stock. . . not less than 3,000 sheep." He concluded that "the whole country from the Blue Ridge to the North Mountains has been made untenable for a rebel army." Sheridan, like the Union soldiers who served under him, also believed that the devastation had weakened southern resistance. He wrote to Grant, "The people here are getting sick of the war; heretofore they have had no reason to complain, because they have been living in great abundance."⁵⁶ On October 9, Early submitted a remarkably similar report to Lee, "[Sheridan] has laid waste nearly all of Rockingham and Shenandoah [counties], and I will have to rely on Augusta [County] for my supplies, and they are not abundant there. Sheridan's purpose, under Grant's orders, has been to render the Valley untenable by our troops by destroying the supplies."⁵⁷ Sheridan had not only demolished Early's provisions; he had also introduced civilians in the Shenandoah Valley to hard war and its devastating results.

The effects of Sheridan's march through the Valley lasted far beyond the war itself. Nearly three years after the burning of Dayton, a Pennsylvania Mennonite made his first visit to the Shenandoah Valley. His remarks are telling,

⁵⁶ Sheridan to Grant, October 7, 1864, OR 43, pt. II: 308.

⁵⁷ Early to Lee, October 9, 1864, OR 43, pt. I: 557-558.

The marks of the war are yet plainly to be seen in the valley. The ruins of houses, barns, bridges, and fences, are numerous. The loss of property, the care, the anxiety, the temptation, and in a few cases the persecutions which our friends here suffered, cannot be fully realized by those who did not live amid the scenes of battle, destruction, waste, bloodshed, and death. . . . But the war-cloud is gone, peace has dawned, and a promising harvest bespeaks the care and the goodness of the God of peace and love.⁵⁸

Recovery would be a slow process for the people of Dayton, but it would come. Far more than Lexington, or even Chambersburg, farmers in southern Rockingham County had lived the horrors of war and experienced hard war. The long encampment of Union forces, combined with the nearly incessant foraging of Confederate troops had taken its toll on the community, and it would be a long while before life returned to normal.

As for the soldiers who had to carry out the burning, most expressed sincere regret at the orders they had received. Chaplain Beaudry questioned the destructive policy altogether,

Such a duty, I hope, our Regiment will never have to perform again. The influence on the Command is very demoralizing. It seems to me that the ultimate result of such a burning on our cause, must be very doubtful. It will exasperate some, inciting them to deeds of grater barbarity, while it will intimidate others, but it is difficult to determine now, where will be the preponderance. . . . We have read of the horror of ‘Fire & Sword,’ but we never saw on this vice before and we will never know what that means.⁵⁹

Union soldiers in the Army of the Shenandoah would not have to wield “the fire and sword” again in the war, but just as they completed their distasteful duties in Virginia, General William T. Sherman and his Military Division of the Mississippi were about to ravage the Georgia landscape in a campaign that would overshadow Sheridan’s “burning” of the Shenandoah Valley. Beaudry may have been correct in his estimation

⁵⁸ Jonathan K. Hartzler, “A Visit to the Shenandoah Valley,” *Herald of Truth*, July 1867.

⁵⁹ Beaudry, 175.

that such conduct was “demoralizing,” but it also proved effective in curtailing the enemy’s ability to wage war. The war would be over six months after the Valley Campaign of 1864 ended.

As for the heroes of Dayton—the 116th Ohio—they simply wanted to be remembered for their humanitarian service to the people whose homes they helped save. Wildes’ ghostwriter contemplated the unit’s contributions after the war, “The people of Dayton anyhow, if of no other place in the South, believed there were at least *some* Yankees who had some humanity in them. . . . If a 116th Ohio man ever happens in Dayton, he may depend upon a warm reception. At least he ought to have one.”⁶⁰ And indeed, almost one hundred fifty years after Dayton was saved by Colonel Wildes and the men of the 116th Ohio, a small monument in the town still memorializes the brave officer and his plea to Sheridan that saved their town. The monument reads,

In memory of Lt. Col. Thomas F. Wiles, 116th Ohio Regiment, who, when ordered by Gen. Sheridan to burn the town of Dayton, Va. in retaliation for the death of a Union officer, refused to obey that order, risking court-martial and disgrace. His refusal and plea to Gen. Sheridan resulted in a countermand to the order, and saved this town from total destruction.

The monument in Dayton serves not only as a memorial to Wildes, but to the use of restraint in hard war as well.

⁶⁰ Wildes, 192.

Conclusion

The Second Shenandoah Valley Campaign in 1864 created new challenges for commanders, soldiers, and civilians on both sides. Pressure on General Grant and President Lincoln to end the war quickly precipitated an increase in the use and severity of hard war policies in the South. Meanwhile, Confederate Lieutenant General Jubal Early worked against his foe, implementing hard war in southern Pennsylvania in a desperate attempt to maintain his supply base in the Shenandoah Valley. Soldiers and civilians found themselves caught in the middle of an increasing cycle of destruction that they seemed to find equally demoralizing.

Hunter's Raid in June signaled the opening volley of destruction in the campaign. General Hunter exercised great restraint in Lexington, selecting three homes—only one of which was privately owned—to be destroyed. He allowed the professors' families to remove their personal effects and actively protected the home of John Letcher's mother from catching fire as the former governor's residence burned next door. Hunter could not have allowed Virginia Military Institute to remain untouched following the school's role in defeating the Union Army at New Market, but he also neglected to burn it completely to the ground. Likewise, he spared nearby Washington College from destruction when he could have consigned it to the same fate as VMI. Hunter acted cautiously in Lexington, spending the night in the town before ordering the destruction of any buildings, and his men carefully noted which properties were destroyed and *why* in their letters and diaries. Yet, in the early stages of the campaign, civilians expressed outrage at the deliberate destruction of a handful of private homes in Lexington, Virginia and Jefferson County, West Virginia. They found, however, that they could justify this limited destruction since

it targeted specific individuals with particular ties to the Confederacy. Even the destruction of VMI provoked little dismay or surprise.

The burning of Chambersburg six weeks later may have been a foolhardy attempt to compensate for financial losses in Virginia, but it succeeded in ramping up the level of destruction in the overall campaign. When Brigadier General John McCausland rode in with orders to collect a ransom or burn the town, many people felt that the line of civilized warfare had been crossed. McCausland—and Early, through him—did not distinguish among which homes would be spared or torched. Grant's letters prior to McCausland's Raid on July 30 clearly indicate that he planned to destroy Confederate supplies in the Shenandoah Valley before the burning of Chambersburg, but civilians and soldiers alike felt that Early's orders to burn private residences indiscriminately had let the proverbial genie out of the bottle. Fears swirled on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line that the scene in Chambersburg would be repeated ad infinitum throughout the eastern theater of the war.

Chambersburg did not cause the widespread implementation of hard war throughout the Shenandoah Valley, but it did persuade Grant to begin the process immediately. General Philip H. Sheridan's appointment over the Middle Military Division signaled the beginning of the destruction there in August 1864. After Union troops spent much of August and September destroying barns, haystacks, and livestock, the controversial death of Lieutenant John Meigs in Dayton provoked the order to burn houses in a prescribed area, regardless of the owners' identities. This time, though, Union soldiers raised the outcry and convinced Sheridan to spare the homes of Unionists in the community by rescinding the order. Still, the overall destruction caused by

Sheridan's troops was far more extensive than the previous instances. Civilians whose homes survived often lost their entire harvest and all of their livestock. Unlike Chambersburg, residents of Rockingham County had no near neighbors with a surplus to share, and many simply chose to leave.

In each town that summer and fall of 1864, the commanders and enlisted men exercised restraint in the destruction. Often, men from both sides had been involved in or witnessed more than one of these raids on civilians. In Lexington, only specific homes were targeted. In Chambersburg, the destruction may have seemed complete, but only the center of town was destroyed, and some soldiers took it upon themselves to spare individual homes. By October, soldiers who had already participated in Hunter's Raid or witnessed the aftermath of McCausland's Raid still did not relish the prospect of destroying homes, and many found excuses *not* to destroy property, even beyond Sheridan's change in orders. Sheridan himself extended mercy to Unionist refugees, providing hundreds of wagons to take them and their belongings North.

To say that the level of destruction steadily increased from June to October would be an oversimplification. Yet the destruction did seem to become less discriminate and more widespread as the campaign progressed. Concurrently, the level of distress soldiers and civilians expressed also increased with each incident, prompting soldiers to go to new lengths to circumvent orders to spare private property. Each instance was sparked by some sentiment of retaliation. And in every instance, without fail, the men and civilians caught in the middle expressed profound regret. Both sides decided that hard war had limits.

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