

# Flames Along the Tennessee River

*By Barbara J. Snow*

As events in the Civil War moved rapidly to a close, a three-pronged set of military forces converged on Marshall County, Alabama, in January 1865. The outcome of their interaction ultimately saw massive property loss and emotional trauma for many people who lived at Manchester, Warrenton, and Guntersville. In fact, according to historian and native Marshall Countian John Allan Wyeth in his essay “Devastation of the Town,” the village of Guntersville “disappeared” with the exception of a few structures.

In late 1864, General Hylan P. Lyon with a brigade of General Bedford Forrest’s cavalry raided through Kentucky. Called the “Court House Burning Raid,” Lyon and his troops burned eight court houses, destroyed several strategic railroad bridges, and damaged/looted a number of Federal supply warehouses. After learning that General John Bell Hood’s Army of the Tennessee had withdrawn toward Corinth, Mississippi, Lyon and approximately 300 cavalymen proceeded south through Tennessee until arriving at Scottsboro, Alabama. On January 8, 1865, the Confederate force engaged in a firefight with 101<sup>st</sup> and 110<sup>th</sup> Colored U. S. Army Troops who were garrisoning the town, guarding a railroad trestle, and protecting water tanks used to supply the steam locomotives. Although Lyon’s cavalry overcame and scattered the guards assigned to protect the town and railway, the general realized that Federal reinforcements would quickly arrive by train from nearby Huntsville. Prudently, Lyon moved toward the Tennessee River with the idea of crossing to the south

side since the Federal troops controlled all of the territory north of the river. He anticipated finding locals friendly to the cause since Confederates held the regions south of the river including the town of Guntersville, valued for its harbor. Unfortunately, the river was at flood stage so maneuvering to cross was difficult. According to journalist Caius (C. G.) Fennell, a boy in 1865 whose family lived near Ft. Deposit (Manchester), Lyon successfully crossed the Tennessee River at Law's Landing about ten miles east of Guntersville. Lyon wrote that he used canoes to move his force although it is unknown how many vessels and/or trips were needed. To accomplish the task, he had the troops dismantle, then re-assemble his cannon.

After negotiating the hazards of the flooded Tennessee River, Lyon ordered his two field pieces, 12-pound Howitzers, to be placed atop Beard's Bluff (now Street's Bluff) to harass the Federal gunboats that plied the river from Decatur to Whitesburg to Guntersville. (Ferry landings also existed at Clarksville between the Flint and Paint Rock Rivers; Hollowell's Landing on Bean Rock Creek across from the Paint Rock River; Fearn's Landing near the current location of Guntersville Dam; and Law's Landing near Columbus City). When he had expended all of the artillery shells, Lyon ordered one of the guns destroyed. Taking the other field piece, Lyon and his unit moved south from Warrenton toward Red Hill, located near the southern boundary line separating Marshall and Blount Counties, with a plan to camp and rest both exhausted men and weary horses.

In the meantime, the second part of the trilogy, the 15<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania Calvary, had reached Huntsville on January 10 after an arduous journey from

southeastern Tennessee in which 400 miles were covered in only nine days. On January 11, 1865, the Federals led by Colonel William J. Palmer and guided by Ben Harris received orders to pursue and engage General Lyon's cavalry. Hired by the day or week, Harris, sometimes partisan, but often renegade, dressed as a Federal soldier but had no proven affiliation; however, he did have a reputation for attacking and murdering in the tragedy called the Buck Island Massacre near Claysville. With only little time to rest or re-supply, Palmer mustered about 200 Federals out of the complement of 600 troops who departed Huntsville about 10:00 P.M. on January 14, 1865, and trekked all night. Some twelve hours later, they arrived at Clarksville Landing west of the Paint Rock River. There, the gunboats *USS General Thomas* and *USS General Grant* transported the men, horses, and equipment to the south side of the Tennessee River. After a brief rest with time to feed their horses, the Federals swung into action marching toward Warrenton to find General Lyon's Confederate cavalry.

Convinced that the Confederates would camp at Red Hill, Colonel Palmer forged forward until 11:00 P.M. when he finally called for a rest stop for food. He gave his men only three hours until the morning of January 15, 1865, at 1:00 A.M. Dividing his force into two columns, he ordered one unit to make a rapid march to Summit in Blount County to circle behind the Confederates. Taking command of the other half of the force, Palmer determined that the two segments meet at Red Hill at 4:00 A.M. with an attack at 5:30 A.M.

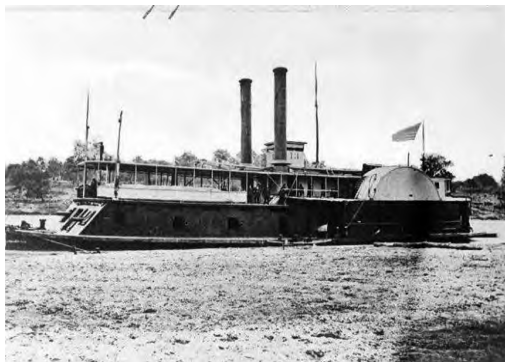
Indeed, the plan Colonel Palmer devised proved successful. At daybreak the Federals rushed the Confederate camp near the home of Thomas Noble at

Red Hill. Since no sentries had been posted, the Confederates had either been secure of their safety or unaware of the Federal pursuers. Out of the roughly 300 Confederates, the Federals captured two captains, four lieutenants, and over 100 enlisted personnel. Furthermore, an abundance of supplies and more than 100 horses were taken.

At the Noble home, Sgt. Arthur Lyon (no relation to General Lyon) of the 15<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania sought to search the farm house and apprehend any officers inside. Without hesitation he immediately galloped to the house, strove into the dwelling, and surprised General Lyon dressed in his nightwear. Captured, the general requested permission to don his uniform. While arranging his clothing, he retrieved a pistol from his belongings. General Lyon turned, fired, and killed Sgt. Lyon with a shot to the head. Grapping his uniform, the general departed through a window to escape into the cold morning.

Although those rooting for the Confederate general may have sighed relief, the saga had only just begun. When news of the death of popular Sgt. Lyon passed through the Federal troops, feelings of indignation, anger, and rage consumed the soldiers. The body of the sergeant was removed with them in a wagon as the column marched back toward Warrenton, Manchester, and Guntersville. In retaliation for his death, the Federals torched plantation houses, farm buildings including smoke houses which held cured meat, slave cabins, and other dwellings in their path. In later years, Caius (C. G.) Fennell reflected that Sherman's method of scorched earth warfare came to the Tennessee Valley. Although many structures were destroyed in the countryside, special mention should be made about the homes of Col. James Sheffield at

Warrenton, Major Arthur Beard at Beard's Bluff, Thomas Atkins Street near Beard's Bluff; a mercantile store; and even a Methodist church, Mt. Olivet Church at Manchester. The town of Warrenton was spared because some of the families held allegiance to the United States. At Manchester, the Dr. James Fennell home was spared since one of the boat pilots, Jim Johnson, argued against its destruction and because Matilda Fennell prepared food for the hungry soldiers. Her daughter, Catharine (Cassie), reported in a diary that her mother had four women working to prepare food for the soldiers. Cassie complained that the



*Example of a Federal Gunboat circa 1865 (open access picture from Internet)*

Federals fed their horses on the family's saved corn and consumed most of their meat. Very near the Tennessee River, the Fennell plantation became a headquarters for the Federals.

The last one of the three-pronged military task force was the U. S. Navy

and its gunboats that maneuvered daily on the Tennessee River. Part of the Mississippi Squadron, the flotilla of gunboats included the *USS General Grant*, *USS General Sherman*, *USS General Thomas*, and *USS General Burnside* along with a support vehicle named *Stone's River* and other smaller supply ships. When the Federal troops reached Ft. Deposit, news of the death of the cavalry sergeant spread quickly among the crews of the gunboats. A squad from the *USS*

*General Grant* went ashore near Beard's Bluff and destroyed several houses/buildings.

In most of the accounts telling of the incidents of burning, statements included allegations of outrage over the death of Sgt. Lyon and hinted that the Federal troops acted indiscriminately. Although this may have been partially true, one source reported that at least one Federal officer indicated his orders included setting fire to a residence. Julia Ann Beard, the daughter of Major Arthur C. Beard, wrote a poem titled "The Burning of Our Home" grieving over her family's experience on January 15, 1865. The following extract from the poem quoted the unnamed officer:

*The officer who held command  
Did then his men array,  
And, with a firm and steady voice,  
At once began to say:  
"My orders are to burn your house  
It is not that I wish to burn  
Your house upon this day.  
But war with all its horrors*

*You've brought upon your  
land,  
And to restore the Union  
I lend a helping hand."*



*Thomas Noble House at Red Hill; Marshall County Archives, Picture taken before structure was razed in the 1990s.*

The event correlated to the gunboat squad having been detailed to Beard's Bluff. This literary expression certainly contradicted reports that the destruction and burning were generated from the ranks.

Around noon on January 15, 1865, the *USS Grant* sailed to Guntersville and detached 40 marines with orders to torch the town. In an attempt to litigate the ensuing destruction a delegation of prominent members of the community met the squadron.

Although some of the names are lost to history, known members of the committee included Dr. L. D. Lusk, Judge Montgomery Gilbreath, and Alex Wiggs. Appealing for the sake of “humanity,” the city’s champions found little empathy. After some negotiation, certain buildings were designated to be saved. Rumor had it that some of the structures housed sick and injured while the Masonic Lodge was spared because some of the Federals belonged to other chapters of that organization. By 4:00 P.M. on January 15, Guntersville lay in ruin, and according to the naval records, had almost totally been erased except for ashes and standing chimneys. Some debate exists about which structures survived. In her diary Cassie Fennell said at the time that the Federals “burned all the houses in Guntersville except nine.” However, most historians report that seven buildings remained—the courthouse, the Guntersville Hotel, the city’s jail, one school, the Masonic Lodge, and two homes. The two dwellings were the Montgomery Gilbreath home on Blount Avenue, now the site of the Guntersville Historical Society, and the Nickels’ home on Hill Avenue.

The next day on January 16, 1865, the *USS Grant* departed Guntersville with 98 men of the 15<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania Cavalry and 91 prisoners. Near Fearn’s Landing, the gunboat put the cavalry ashore with 1000 pounds of hard bread, 80 pounds of coffee, and 160 pounds of sugar. After off-loading the mounted troops, the gunboat took the prisoners to Huntsville

where they were dispersed to various prisoner-of-war camps.

Years later in 1891, Willis M. Hatch, a member of the 40-man squad responsible for burning Guntersville, exchanged letters with Caius (C. G.) Fennell, editor of the Guntersville *Democrat*. In part, Hatch explained that during the war “each tried to do his duty as God gave him to see his duty.” In looking back to that chaotic time, he asked veterans of both armies, Confederate and Union, to reflect without regret but to “honor and respect” the sacrifices each soldier made “with malice toward none but charity for all.” Hatch further remarked that he lived in Decatur, Georgia, but still had contact with men in Pennsylvania with whom he had served. He and fellow comrades had sorrowed “more than the injured” over the events of January 1865 and commented “remember young man thy sins will find you out.” Having visited Guntersville in a time previous to the letter and having attended the Presbyterian Church there, Hatch remarked on a conversation with a woman who said the people of Guntersville “have forgiven us all.” In his conclusion, he had comforted his old comrades that they were considered “friends, not enemies” and that the people of Guntersville offered love and an invitation to visit.

When the extensive loss of property, Guntersville and surrounding locales faced hardships and the difficult task of rebuilding. In a lengthy reconstruction, Guntersville and its neighbors did revive! One lady commented that the community “builded (sic) better than she knew.” Looking at the lovely lake country and reflecting on the thousands of tourists who visit yearly, locals can reflect that they have been the witnesses of a Phoenix from the ashes and the



beneficiaries of the sacrifices of citizens who lived during these events.



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