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A Change in Tactics: Hard War in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, the Valley Campaign of 1864

Lewis A. Taylor II

When the American Civil War began in 1861, a military tradition inherited from the eighteenth century dominated the way that the combatants waged war. It was a tradition that showed moderation in conducting war, especially in regards to civilians; however, those principles of war would soon change. Following the excessive violence of the sixteenth century Wars of Religion, European leaders consciously made a distinction between the State and civilians. They pursued wars for political or dynastic reasons and fought with relatively small, professional armies. Military commanders generally regarded civilians as innocent bystanders who happened to get involved in the arguments that took place between nations—or, as in the case of the American Civil War—between sectional governments. Government and military leaders typically considered non-combatants, especially women, children, conscientious objectors, and the elderly as eligible for special protection.

Even though some reversal of this separation of armies and civilians occurred by the end of the eighteenth-century and the beginning of the nineteenth, a policy of conciliation remained in place and continued throughout the first three years of the American Civil War. When the war began, President Lincoln and other politicians in the North did not believe that all Southerners were in favor of secession and the slave owners controlled the entire secessionist movement. President Lincoln also did not acknowledge the South's secession from the Union; as a result, the United States should continue to treat Southern citizens as civilians and protect their constitutional rights. As early as 1862, General Henry W. Halleck, the general in chief of the Union Army, worked with Francis Lieber on many issues, including "how to handle guerrillas and how to treat prisoners of war."¹ Lieber, who was working at Columbia College in New York City, was a German-native who lived and taught in South Carolina for two decades where he was a former slave owner.² An avid critic of secession, Lieber published *Guerrilla Parties Considered with Reference to the Laws and Usages of War* (1862) and *A Code for the Government of Armies* (1863); the latter which the Federal War Department revised and issued.

In his articles, Lieber said armies needed to practice restraint while in the field. He said that officers needed to be held accountable for the actions of those under them, even when they were following orders and that “armies should be prohibited from the ‘wanton destruction’ of non-military resources.”³ He did insist, however, that there may be times when military necessity would dictate a different course of action—allowing for the “destruction of property, and obstruction of the ways and channels of traffic, travel, or communication, and of all withholding of sustenance or means of life from the enemy.”⁴ This explanation of “military necessity” was the blueprint for what was to follow.

By 1864, President Lincoln, frustrated by Union defeats and the inability of the vastly superior Union war machine to defeat the Confederate forces and crush the rebellion, began looking for a general who could take command of the Union forces, crush the rebellion, and end the war.

President Lincoln found the general he was looking for in Ulysses S. Grant. General Grant received the nickname “Unconditional Surrender” Grant in 1862 at the Battle of Fort Donelson when Brigadier General Simon Bolivar Buckner, the fort’s commanding officer, requested terms of surrender and Grant had replied that the only terms available were an unconditional and immediate surrender of the fort. Grant’s insistence on surrender without terms fit very well with what Lincoln was looking for in a general, and Grant’s attitude was to do whatever needed to win. General Grant and his lieutenants, Phil Sheridan and David Hunter, would bring “hard war” to the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia—the breadbasket of the Confederacy—in an effort to deprive the Confederate army of needed supplies but to also convince the citizens of the Shenandoah Valley that the Union forces would no longer tolerate their support of the Confederate army. As General Grant stated in his orders to his lieutenants: “eat out Virginia clear and clean . . . so that crows flying over it for the balance of the season will have to carry their provender [food] with them.”⁵ With support from President Lincoln, who had changed his attitude on how to fight the war, Grant initiated a campaign within a campaign in the spring and summer of 1864. Grant determined first to destroy the Confederate army of General Jubal Early in the Shenandoah Valley and then to bring the war to the residents of the Valley by destroying their ability to supply the Confederate forces elsewhere in Virginia and to convince them that continuing the conflict was an exercise in futility. To accomplish this, he turned to two of his senior lieutenants: Generals David Hunter and Philip Sheridan. Many

people are familiar with General William Tecumseh Sherman's "March to the Sea." Few are familiar with the destruction General David Hunter caused in the upper part of the Shenandoah Valley, especially in the town of Lexington where his forces burned and gutted both Virginia Military Institute and Washington College, or the "hard war" General Philip Sheridan waged in the central portion of the Valley, specifically Rockingham and Page counties. Hunter started the ball rolling in the spring of 1864, but Sheridan finally brought the Confederate army in the Shenandoah Valley, and along with it, the Valley civilians, to its knees.

The Shenandoah Valley

When one mentions the Shenandoah Valley, people think of its scenic beauty, history, and the song "Shenandoah." A great number of people, who



Figure 1 *Bellevue, The Lewis Homestead, Salem, Virginia*. Oil on canvas by Edward Beyer, c. 1855.

populated the southern regions of the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, passed through the Valley on their way to North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Texas. In 1861 to 1865, however, the Shenandoah Valley and its rich farmlands were anything but serene. It was the

scene of more than three hundred military actions according to the National Park Service. They classify fifteen of these actions as major battles, and four of these battles took place between September 19 and October 19 of 1864.⁶

The Shenandoah Valley is the northern portion of the more extensive Great Valley of Virginia, which is a small portion of the Great Appalachian Valley that runs for over twelve hundred miles from Quebec, Canada, to the state of Alabama. The borders of the Shenandoah Valley are the Blue Ridge Mountains on the east and the first ranges of the Allegheny Mountains on the west. The Shenandoah Valley runs for approximately 125 miles in a northeasterly direction from the northern part of Rockbridge County in the south to the Potomac River in the north. While varying in width, the valley, at its widest, is only twenty-five miles wide.⁷ The valley is composed of nine counties—Shenandoah, Page, Rockingham, and Augusta in the Lower Valley; Frederick, Warren and Clark in the upper Valley; as well as Berkley and Jefferson counties in West Virginia. The Shenandoah River flows northward through the Valley in two forks that come together at Front Royal and then flowing, as one stream, northward to Harper’s Ferry, West Virginia where it joins the Potomac River. Because of this northerly flow of the Shenandoah River, a person traveling north in the Valley is said to be going “down the Valley”—a distinction that causes confusion to the Valley’s many visitors.

The traditional explanation of the discovery of the Shenandoah Valley by Europeans was the expedition launched by Governor Alexander Spotswood and his “Knights of the Golden Horseshoe,” who viewed the Shenandoah Valley from the crest of the Blue Ridge Mountains in 1716 from a point just east of what is now the town of Elkton in Rockingham County. Other sources state that Colonel Abraham Wood and Captain Henry Batte explored the Shenandoah Valley, which John Wayland disputed in his book about the German element in the Shenandoah Valley.⁸ Wayland does report that a German immigrant by the name of Johann Lederer led a group of explorers from east of the Blue Ridge Mountains into the Valley in 1670.⁹

While many English settlers moved to the Valley from the Tidewater area of Virginia as well as its Eastern shore, the majority of the Valley settlers came down an old Native American trail known as the “Great Wagon Road.” This road, now Interstate 81, ran from Pennsylvania through Virginia and into North Carolina and was the main roadway settlers of German and Scots-Irish ancestry used as they migrated south from Pennsylvania.¹⁰ Many of the German immigrants, especially

the Mennonites, entered the Valley through Page County and then began moving into Rockingham County in the central part of the Valley. The Quakers came from the east entering the Valley from Frederick County, Maryland, and Loudoun County, Virginia. There were also French Huguenots who settled in the Rockingham-Augusta county areas and the Scots-Irish who settled primarily in the upper and lower parts of the Valley.

By the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, the Shenandoah Valley was a melting pot of immigrants, primarily farmers who were raising wheat, had few slaves, and were not part of the slave-owning aristocracy of eastern Virginia. There were many people supportive of the Union who did not favor secession, as well as a significant group of pacifists who wanted nothing to do with politics in the Valley. This was the civilian population to whom the Union was bringing the war, a population that supported both the Union and the Confederacy and that just wanted to be left alone. Unfortunately, the new commander of the Union armies had a different plan for the inhabitants of the Shenandoah Valley. From Lexington in the south, to Harrisonburg in the center, and northward another forty miles to Woodstock, in two separate campaigns, Hunter and Sheridan would wage hard war on the Shenandoah Valley, a war that the Confederacy could not stop.

The Beginning of Hard War: General David Hunter, June – July 1864

The movement towards “hard war” did not suddenly emerge in 1864, but under the new leadership of Ulysses S. Grant; the focus was an overwhelming drive to defeat the Confederate forces under Robert E. Lee in Virginia, opening the door to ending the war. Grant believed that after a defeat there should not be a retreat or even a long break to regroup, but rather the Union armies needed to be constantly advancing, overwhelming the enemy and wear it down by attrition if nothing else worked. Grant also brought with him William Tecumseh Sherman who had already shown a willingness to use whatever force necessary to devastate the countryside so that the enemy army could not draw any sustenance from it.¹¹ Grant determined to keep pressure on the Confederates on all fronts, in early May of 1864, assigned General Franz Sigel to clear the Shenandoah Valley. To say that he was unsuccessful would be an understatement. Sigel’s orders included destroying the Confederate supply base in Staunton, moving eastward to tear up the tracks of the Virginia Central Railroad, and then continuing on to

Charlottesville to destroy that supply base as well. Sigel, not considered the most competent general in the Union Army, received his position in an attempt to keep the German population of the North happy. He moved his army at a very slow pace allowing Confederate General John C. Breckenridge to pull together enough forces to defeat him soundly at the Battle of New Market on May 15. Following this defeat, Grant relieved Sigel and replaced him with General David Hunter, giving him virtually the same orders as had been given to Sigel.

Hunter was a much more aggressive general, and under his leadership, the Union forces penetrated further into the Shenandoah Valley than any other previous attempt. Grant expected this from a general “who had earlier sought permission to ravage the homes of Southern slaveholders. . . . [and] believed in hard war.”¹² Hunter’s campaign of fire and vandalism soon became notorious.

Upon entering the Valley, Hunter defeated the Confederates under General W. E. Jones at the Battle of Piedmont on June 5. He then moved on to Staunton where part of his army destroyed the warehouses and supplies stored there, along with the “steam mill, foundry, and carriage and woolens factories,”¹³ while others began destroying the



Figure 2 *Officer David Hunter, full-length portrait in full military dress.* Photographic print on carte de visite mount: albumen. By E. &H.T. Anthony, NY. Library of Congress.

railroad tracks leading east towards Charlottesville. When Hunter saw that the Confederates had strengthened their position on the mountain pass between Waynesboro and Charlottesville, Hunter decided to move his forces southward to Lynchburg. Lynchburg, while not as large as Charlottesville, was also a major supply center that had not only railroads, but also canals which connected it with the eastern part of Virginia.

On his way to Lynchburg, Hunter stopped in Lexington and burned the Virginia Military Institute (in retaliation for the services of the VMI cadets at the Battle of New Market) along with the home of a former Virginia governor, John Letcher. Lt. John Rogers Meigs, Hunter's engineer, "availed himself of the opportunity, helping himself to a fine set of mathematical instruments before the institute's buildings were set ablaze."¹⁴ The person responsible for the burning was Hunter's chief of staff, Colonel David H. Strother, who said that VMI was "a most dangerous institution, where treason was systematically taught."¹⁵ In a report dated August 8, 1864, Hunter stated that "[o]n the 12 (June) I also burned the Virginia Military Institute and all the buildings connected with it. I found here a violent and inflammatory proclamation from John Letcher, lately Governor of Virginia, inciting the population of the country to rise and wage guerrilla warfare on my troops."¹⁶

For two days, Hunter and his men burned and looted the town of Lexington, a delay that allowed Robert E. Lee to anticipate that Hunter's next target was Lynchburg. This action was applauded by one Union soldier who wrote home, "Father, Hunter is just the man for the job of putting down this rebellion he is a fierce and savage looking man he has no mercy on the rebels."¹⁷ Colonel Strother, when assessing the results of the campaign said in his report that "[a]bout fifty miles of the Virginia Central Railroad had been effectually destroyed; the Virginia and Tennessee road had been destroyed to some extent for the same distance; an incredible amount of public property had been burned, including canal-boats, and railroad trains loaded with ordinance and commissary stores, numerous extensive iron works, manufactories of saltpeter, musket-stocks, shoes, saddles and artillery-harness, woolen cloths, and grain mills."¹⁸

While Hunter pushed Breckinridge further up the Valley, he still managed to cause Hunter problems. Believing that Breckenridge's force was too small to cause any major problems, Hunter relaxed and delayed moving on Lynchburg, a delay that allowed Lee to move General Jubal Early and the Second Corps of the Army of Northern Virginia into the Valley. The combined forces of Breckenridge

and Early were able to drive Hunter across the Valley and into the mountains of West Virginia, effectively clearing the Shenandoah Valley of Union forces, a move that left Washington, D.C. and Pennsylvania vulnerable to the Confederate forces under Early and Breckenridge.

Emboldened by his success against Hunter, and with the blessings of Lee, Early moved his forces northward to the outskirts of Washington, D.C., where he met the Union forces at Fort Stevens. Lee needed to have some relief at Petersburg, and believed that should Early put pressure on Washington, Grant would have no choice but to pull Union troops away from Petersburg and bring them back for the defense of the capital. While Early's movement to Washington was not a tactical success, it nevertheless showed the vulnerability of the city, and for a short time, Lincoln came under enemy fire at Fort Stevens. Standing on the parapet, others warned Lincoln that his position was vulnerable to sharpshooters, and it was only after a Union officer "was shot down within three feet of him, when he reluctantly stepped below."¹⁹

Realizing the Confederates could continue to use the Valley to threaten Washington, D.C., Grant sent a communication to the army Chief of Staff, General Henry Halleck, on July 14 saying he needed to assemble a force that could "eat out Virginia clear and clean." The next day he told Halleck that "Hunter . . . should make all of the Valley south of the B&O [rail]road a desert as high as possible. I do not mean that houses should be burned, but all provisions and stock should be removed, and the people notified to move out."²⁰ After a roundabout trip, Hunter finally ended up back in the Valley, coming back through Harper's Ferry. After getting his command back in shape and receiving reinforcements, he began his search for Early and his army. After a futile search, he began to terrorize the Valley, more out of frustration and his need for vengeance after rough treatment earlier in the year than from any rational plan of attack. Hunter ordered the burning of many homes in the Lower Valley, even that of one of his distant cousins Henrietta Lee. One of the victims of Hunter's terrorism wrote the following to the general after her house was destroyed: "Your office is not to lead like a brave man and soldier, your men to fight in the ranks of war, but your work has been to separate yourself from all danger, and with your incendiary band steal unawares upon helpless women and children, to insult and destroy."²¹ Even Hunter's artillery chief, Henry Dupont wrote that Hunter was "dominated by prejudices and antipathies so intense and so violent as to render him at times quite incapable of

taking a fair and unbiased view of many military and political situations.”²² Grant realized it was time for a change in command in the Valley and he accepted Hunter’s resignation, appointing General George Crook as his replacement.

During July and August of 1864, Jubal Early and his army had helped relieve some of the pressure Grant was exerting on Lee’s army at Petersburg by heading north into Pennsylvania. There he burned the town of Chambersburg in an eye-for-an-eye policy. The burning of Chambersburg “sealed the fate of the Valley and its people and opened the door to some of the most desperate acts of war ever targeted against civilians.”²³ Following Early’s foray into Pennsylvania, Sheridan defeated him at the Battles of Third Winchester on September 19, 1864, and then at Fisher’s Hill on September 21, forcing Early to retreat up the Valley to try to regroup and resupply.

What happened during October in the Shenandoah Valley would cause a Union soldier from Vermont, Private William Fisk, to write, “They have tasted the bitter fruit of secession, and have had enough of it. . . . They see the grim determination of the North and they begin to feel that to hold out longer is to fight against inevitable destiny.”²⁴ That same private also wrote in his diaries that many of the citizens of Harrisonburg “are heartily praying for peace, let it come in what way it will. . . . They find that it [war] does not satisfy, that it was a poor remedy for their imaginary grievances.”²⁵ It is doubtful that Private Fisk was speaking (at that point) for the bulk of the civilian population of the area, but the firestorm that was coming would soon cause even the most steadfast supporter of the Confederacy to stop and think about their commitment to the Confederate cause. This was because the population of Rockingham County more than doubled when more than 28,000 men under the command of Philip Sheridan set up camp around Harrisonburg, the county seat. While Sheridan was aware that he had severely hurt Early’s forces, he was aware that Early was not ready to give up control of the “breadbasket of the Confederacy.”

Hard War Intensifies: General Philip Sheridan, August – October, 1864

Philip H. Sheridan was a captain in the Thirteenth United States Infantry, serving as the quartermaster and commissary officer for the regiment when the war began. Within a short time, Major General Henry Halleck, commander of the

Department of the Missouri, appointed him as his quartermaster, a position he held during the campaign for Corinth, Mississippi.

While Sheridan was efficient in this position, he was “remembered as not being very pleasant.”²⁶ Sheridan had a confrontation with Brigadier General Samuel R. Curtis, who commanded in Southwest Missouri, over some horses that thieves had stolen from local farmers and were now trying to sell to the army to replace lost cavalry mounts. The issue arose when Sheridan refused a direct order from General Curtis to pay for the horses, and “responded with some hastily chosen words.”²⁷ Curtis had Sheridan placed under arrest for his refusal to obey a direct



Figure 3 *Major General P. H. Sheridan*. Photographic print on card mount, albumen, photographed between 1861 and 1865. Library of Congress.

order, but Halleck stepped in and transferred Sheridan to Tennessee before a court martial could take place.

Sheridan was happy with the transfer no longer assigned to rear echelon duties, but in command of the Second Michigan Cavalry. By the end of 1863, Sheridan had attained the rank of major general and had, in that capacity,

commanded XX Corps of infantry at the battles of Chattanooga and Chickamauga.²⁸ Sheridan was a confident leader and that trait, along with his aggressive leadership, caused him to stand out from the other Union commanders in the Western Theater. When Grant rose to lieutenant general and took command of all Union military forces, he brought Sheridan east to be in charge of the cavalry corps of the Army of the Potomac—one of only three general officers who were battle tested selected to accompany Grant to the Eastern Theater. One of those waiting to meet with General Sheridan when he arrived in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, in August of 1864, was a young lieutenant named John Meigs. Lt. Meigs was an engineer who had served with the Union army west of the Blue Ridge Mountains for most of the past year, and of all the engineers available, Meigs knew the territory best. Little did Lt. Meigs know that in two months he would be the center of a controversy caused a large amount of destruction in the small town of Dayton, Virginia.

Two days after meeting Sheridan and impressing him with his knowledge of the Shenandoah Valley, Meigs received assignment as chief engineer with General Crook's army in the Department of West Virginia. In two weeks, Sheridan decided how he would proceed in his campaign; he brought Meigs from General Crook's army and assigned him as his aide-de-camp, becoming, at age twenty-two, the chief engineer of all forces under the command of General Philip Sheridan. Sheridan later wrote, "I found that, with the aid of Meigs, who was most intelligent in his profession, the region in which I was to operate would soon be well fixed in my mind. Meigs was familiar with every important road and stream and with all points worthy of note west of the Blue Ridge, and was particularly well equipped with knowledge regarding the Shenandoah Valley."²⁹

Sheridan was, more than anything, a clear-thinking planner. He was also an opportunistic combatant who shared Grant's belief that the defeats suffered by the Union forces during the first three years of the war necessitated a change in the basic rules of warfare. It was not enough to engage the enemy in battle. The Union needed to end the war before the civilian population lost heart and demanded peace on any terms. To do this, they had to destroy the institutions that supported the Confederate army and allowed it to live, move, and fight.

During the month of August 1864, not only did Sheridan skirmish with parts of Jubal Early's army on almost a daily basis, he also had to put up with constant raids on his camps, supply lines, and lines of communications by roving

band of guerrillas. The problem was that many of these so-called guerrillas were not guerrillas at all, but part of the Confederate army—but because they lacked proper uniforms, they were mistaken as partisan rangers or guerrillas. Partisans and guerrillas were not part of the army, and because of that, did not receive the same considerations if captured. One particular incident is still talked about in the town of Dayton—the execution of Davy Getz.

Near the town of Woodstock, troopers from General George Custer's Michigan brigade captured a civilian with a rifle in the woods near their camp. The troopers labeled him a bushwacker, but in reality, Davy was a thirty-nine-year-old with the mind of a child, who happened to be out hunting squirrels. There was no time to settle this affair until late September, following the Union victories at Third Winchester and Fisher's Hill, and after the Union forces had moved south to Harrisonburg to set up camp between that city and the town of Dayton.

They brought Getz, left with the Michigan brigade's supply wagons, before a court in Dayton, convened by Custer, and sentenced him to death by firing squad. They took Getz out to a field, made him dig his own grave, and then executed him.³⁰ Citizens of Dayton and Rockingham County found the execution of Getz as well as the occupation of the area by Northern soldiers extremely aggravating. While they remembered the members of the 116th Ohio Infantry, who had been in charge of the town, as gentlemen; they remembered the cavalry in a different light altogether. Even though orders forbid looting, they were not enforced, and it was not just the enlisted men doing the looting—officers also looted things. Captain John Deforest of the 12th Connecticut Infantry remembered his time in Rockingham County by writing it was “a time for devastating crops and devouring cattle.”³¹

Following the Union victory at Fisher's Hill and the final battle of Sheridan's campaign in October, a separate campaign took place in the central part of the Valley. Historians said little about this other campaign because it intentionally took the war to the civilian population. They had jumped from the battle at Fisher's Hill to the cavalry battle at Tom's Brook several weeks later without mentioning what Sheridan and his army had done during the missing weeks. It was not until recently, when Stephen Starr, in his *Union Cavalry in the Civil War* wrote, “[t]he deliberate planned devastation of the Shenandoah Valley has deservedly ranked as one of the grimmest episodes of a sufficiently grim war.

Unlike the haphazard destruction caused by (Gen. William T.) Sherman's bummers in Georgia, it was committed systematically, and by order."³²

When Sheridan first entered Rockingham County, he became aware of the abundance of crops (Rockingham County was one of the nation's top ten

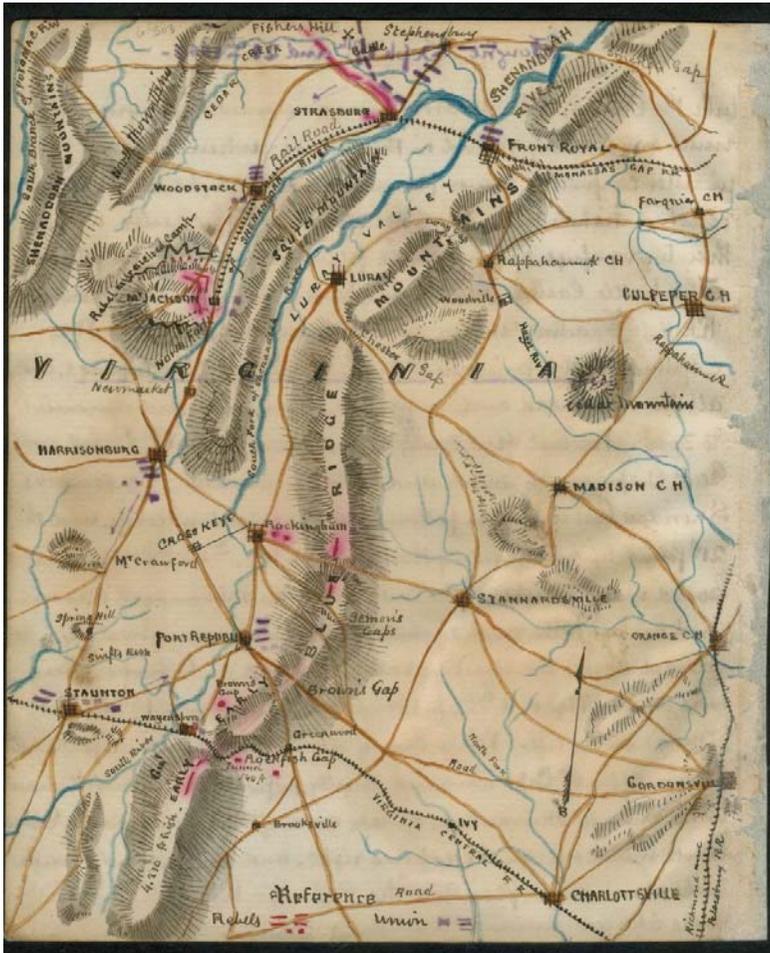


Figure 4 *Map of the Shenandoah Valley Campaign, 1864*. Map, pen-and-ink and watercolor. Contributed by Robert Knox Sneden. Created 1864-1865. Library of Congress.

agricultural counties at that time³³) and after establishing his headquarters in a private home in Harrisonburg, he began to send requests to Grant, asking him to “change the direction of his campaign.”³⁴ Sheridan had already destroyed many

barns in Augusta County prior to moving to Harrisonburg, and he now argued that if they did not completely “destroy the Valley’s harvest and everything that supported it, they would have to deal in the future with other Confederate armies using the Valley to threaten the North.”³⁵

What Grant was not aware of was that Sheridan had already begun the destruction. For thirteen days, from September 26 to October 8, there was continuous burning of property and the confiscating of livestock in the Valley’s four central counties: Augusta, Rockingham, Shenandoah, and Page. Augusta and Rockingham counties were the two largest producers of wheat in Virginia—and because of this known as the “breadbasket of the Confederacy.” Grant utilized over five thousand cavalymen and a brigade of infantry in the actual destruction of property, “while thousands of other soldiers in blue were called upon to drive off or kill livestock.”³⁶

The worst moments for Dayton and Rockingham County came in early October. On October 3, Lt. Meigs, Sheridan’s engineer, was out with two orderlies making the rounds of the different camps so they could note the location of each brigade should Sheridan decide to move his forces. They had finished their duties and were heading back into Harrisonburg when three riders approached wearing oilcloths for protection against the light rain that had started falling. The riders turned away from Meigs, but he followed them, ordering them to stop. They refused his orders and kept moving. Meigs and his men kept following the riders until finally they wheeled their horses around to prepare for a confrontation. When Meigs came up on the riders, who were actually scouts from Wickham’s brigade, the scouts ordered him to surrender. He refused, pulled his weapon, and shot one of the Confederates. One of them then shot Meigs through the head and killed him. One of his orderlies was able to escape and get back into the Union lines where he said guerrillas operating in the area attacked them.

When Sheridan heard of Meig’s death, he flew into a rage. Guerrillas and bushwackers had consistently irritated him since his arrival in the Valley, and now they had killed one of his favorite officers. The orderly reported civilians had fired on them and shot down Meigs in cold blood while trying to surrender. What he probably heard was the Confederate telling Meigs to surrender, and he was not aware that they were soldiers because their oilskins covered their uniforms. Even so, Sheridan regarded Meig’s death as murder, not an act of war. The next morning he sent Major George A. Forsyth, one of his aides, to find Meigs’ body.

Forsyth speculated, and no one questioned his reasoning (or why a group of bushwackers would operate that close to a Union camp), that members of Mosby's or White's gang had murdered Meigs.³⁷

Because of this act of murder, "Sheridan ordered that the entire town of Dayton and all surrounding houses in a five mile radius be burned to the ground. The task of burning the area fell to General Custer's Fifth New York cavalry and the men of the 116th Ohio Infantry. The people of Dayton and Harrisonburg saw homes beyond the towns totally engulfed in flames as Custer and his men began their assignment. The Union soldiers visited every town between Dayton and Bridgewater, running off slaves, killing farm animals, and burning buildings."³⁸ They did not spare the farm of one of President Lincoln's cousins. At the farm of Joseph and Abigail Coffman, (Abigail's father and Lincoln's grandfather were brothers) the soldiers killed all of the hogs, burned the barn, new smokehouse, and granary, and destroyed almost all of the fencing. The house was spared, but only because it was used as a head-quarters by Custer.³⁹

While this devastation was taking place in the county, the people of the town of Dayton were watching and waiting to see what would happen to their homes. Finally, Colonel Wildes of the 116th Ohio sent a messenger to Sheridan and told him the citizens of the town had treated him and his men well and asked that he rescind his order to burn the town. William T. Patterson, a soldier in Wilde's regiment, writing in his diary reflected the anguish that the common soldier felt about this duty: "This will include the city of Harrisonburg, the towns of Bridgewater and Dayton. . . . This evening the citizens are removing their goods. . . . The work of destruction is commencing in the suburbs of the town."⁴⁰ Sheridan, while unhappy over the death of his lieutenant, held Wildes in high regard and agreed to spare the town. The order to burn the outlying homes and farms still stood.

When the 116th Ohio heard Sheridan rescinded the order to burn the town, "there was louder cheering than there ever was when we made a bayonet charge." Colonel Wildes observed "a great deal of clapping of hands and shouts of gladness of the little children over the good news," and that this was "too much for even the grim and sturdy old soldiers. The sleeve of many a blouse was wet with their tears."⁴¹ The depredations endured by the residents of Dayton, Harrisonburg, and other parts of Rockingham County were over by the end of the first week of October. Sheridan had decided to move his army down the Valley

toward Strasburg and Front Royal. His move determined that the final battles of the Valley campaign would be fought at Cedar Creek, instead of near Harrisonburg.

Jubal Early had re-entered the Valley in Augusta County and prepared to move northward himself. The destruction left little in the area to support an army, even a force as small as the one Early led. Often the men had to spread one day's rations over two or three days, although they were able to grind some grain in a mill that somehow Custer had missed while burning the area. As one Confederate soldier remembered, "Our hearts ached at the horrible sight, our beautiful Valley almost a barren waste and we with an army so inferior in numbers as to render success almost hopeless. Yet the sight carried with it unseen power and determination to avenge this dastardly warfare, making us doubly equal to such an enemy."⁴²

Sheridan confirmed this destruction in his report of October 7 in the *Official Records*:

In moving back to this point, the whole country from the Blue Ridge to the North Mountains has been made untenable for a rebel army. I have destroyed over 2,000 barns filled with wheat, hay, and farming implements; over seventy mills filled with flour and wheat; have driven in front of the army over 4,000 head of stock, and have killed and have issued to the troops not less than 3,000 sheep. This destruction embraces the Luray Valley and little Fort Valley, as well as the main Valley. . . . Lieutenant 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.⁴³

It is interesting to note that Sheridan still regarded the death of Meigs as a murder, even though it was determined that those involved were not partisan guerrillas, but army scouts, making Meigs' death a combat death, not murder. Another report says that cavalry troops under Wesley Merritt "destroyed 630 barns; 47 flouring mills; 4 sawmills; 1 woolen mill 3,982 tons of hay, straw and fodder; more than 400,000 bushels of wheat; 3 furnaces; 515 acres of corn; 750 bushels of oats; more than 3,000 head of livestock; 560 barrels of flour; 2 tanneries; 1 railroad depot, 1 locomotive engine; and 3 boxcars."⁴⁴

After the Union forces had left Rockingham County, the officers of the court, located in Harrisonburg, appointed a committee to assess the destruction inflicted within their jurisdiction. This jurisdiction included the city of Harrisonburg and Rockingham County only. On November 11, 1864, the

committee published its report in the *Rockingham Register and Advertiser*. The committee found that in Rockingham County alone the Union Army destroyed over 100,000 bushels of wheat along with 50,000 bushels of corn. The Union forces also burned 30 dwelling houses and 450 barns.⁴⁵

Sheridan was convinced that the devastation he caused in Rockingham, Augusta, and Page counties was sufficient. He believed that even if a Confederate force could follow him, its soldiers would be in no condition to fight. However, as the Union Army moved northward, shadowy riders began to appear on the horizon—riders wearing the grey of the Confederate cavalry. These riders were the advance scouts for General Jubal Early, who followed Sheridan northward until, at Cedar Creek, battle between the two forces decided the fate of the Shenandoah Valley.

Conclusion: The End of the Destruction

The “burning” was over. The Union forces had moved north to try to crush Jubal Early and his army. Now it was time for the residents of Augusta, Page, and especially Rockingham counties to start putting their lives back together.

While some produce managed to survive the destruction caused by Generals Hunter and Sheridan, most of the Valley residents suffered from shortages that winter. Solomon Wenger of Rockingham County “remembered that his father’s horses nearly starved.”⁴⁶ Just north of Harrisonburg, near Fisher’s Hill, one of Fisher’s grandchildren was able to crawl into the bottom of their mill and scrape up close to a bushel of old flour dust. In later years, Mr. Fisher recalled that “[w] sifted the worms out of it and mother baked it into bread.”⁴⁷

Ironically, the very government that sanctioned Sheridan’s campaign of destruction provided emergency rations, and sent them to the Valley on the Baltimore & Ohio and the Manassas Gap railroads. Problematically, however, the government sent the rations to Winchester and for those people living in Rockingham County, the trip to obtain rations was close to seventy miles—a trip not easily made in 1864.

The justice who presided over Rockingham County wrote, “many of his constituents were without a pound of meat, bread, or anything to live on, to say nothing of fire-wood. It will require the daily and hourly exertions of the poor and those who have been burnt out to procure a scanty subsistence to sustain life during

the winter.”⁴⁸ The editor of the *Richmond Examiner* was quite blunt in his description of the suffering in the Valley when he wrote, “The horror and crime of this devastation was remarkable even in Yankee warfare. They impoverished a whole population; they reduced women and children to beggary and starvation.”⁴⁹

The use of fire as a weapon in the 1860s was frightening to everyone concerned. Robby Martin, who was a small child in 1864, described this scene later in his life: “I have always carried . . . a vivid picture of the mighty roaring, varicolored flames that licked up the flour mill. The flames leaped upward in great pointed spirals. . . . The vivid red that predominated had for contrast all shades of green and other colors . . . possibly partly consumed gases from wheat and flour and meal mingled with the real flames.”⁵⁰

The orders that Ulysses S. Grant gave to Generals Hunter and Sheridan were very succinct. There were two aspects to these orders: rid the Shenandoah Valley of all Confederate forces and make the Valley so desolate that it cannot supply any Confederate armies. Hunter failed in his mission, Sheridan succeeded. Sheridan’s success prompted John Mead Gould of the 29th Maine to write in his journal following the Union victory at Cedar Creek: “History must give General Sheridan credit for doing what only such Generals as Napoleon and his kind have been able to.”⁵¹

What did all of this destruction mean to the Confederacy? It was the primary cause of the losses suffered by the Confederacy at Tom’s Brook and Cedar Creek—defeats caused in part by the “famished condition of his [Early’s] army.”⁵² The loss of the autumn harvest in the Valley meant that supplies to Lee’s army in Petersburg would dramatically decrease, and probably more than anything, Sheridan’s successes helped reelect Abraham Lincoln to another term.

The Shenandoah Valley would return to normal eventually because of the industriousness of the residents, helped by friends and family living in other areas, and by Northerners who were willing to invest in the rebuilding of the Valley. By 1870, farms had returned to levels that existed before the war and railroads that had been destroyed, were rebuilt. In time, even those who should have been the most unforgiving realized that the destruction had a purpose. When asked about “the burning,” an ex-Confederate cavalry officer replied: “What is the worst in war, to burn a barn or kill a fellow man?”

Notes

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3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. John L. Heatwole, *The Burning: Sheridan in the Shenandoah Valley* (Charlottesville, VA: Rockbridge Publishing, 1998), 8.
6. Jonathan A. Noyalas, ed., "*Give the Enemy no rest!*": *Sheridan's 1864 Shenandoah Campaign* (New Market, VA: Shenandoah Valley Battlefields Foundation, 2007), 1.
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28. William L. Shea and Earl J. Hess, *Pea Ridge: Civil War Campaign in the West* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 276.
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30. John W. Wayland, *A History of Shenandoah County Virginia* (Strasburg, VA: Shenandoah Publishing House, 1927), 386-387.
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34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., 30-31.
36. Ibid., 31.
37. Heatwole, 93.
38. Ibid., 93-94.
39. Ibid., 97.
40. Grimsley, 184.
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52. Ibid., 34.

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