

## War Comes to Scottsville

By Richard L. Nicholas

Next year will mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of one of the most important events in the history of Scottsville since its official founding in 1818. It was during the week of March 6-10, 1865 that Scottsville was occupied by Union soldiers under the command of Civil War General Philip H. Sheridan. While the event was of little significance within the context of the overall Civil War, it had an enormous, enduring, and very personal impact on the people of Scottsville and the neighboring countryside that were caught in the path of ten thousand marauding Yankee cavalymen. What follows is a summation of that historic tragedy with emphasis on some of the people in our community who were directly affected.

For almost four years, Scottsville and the surrounding area along the James River in central Virginia had been lucky. The Civil War had been raging in other areas of the State since the first land battle of the war at Big Bethel near Hampton on June 10, 1861. Over the next three and one-half years dozens of other battles and campaigns had been fought on the soil of the eastern and northern parts of the Old Dominion and in the Shenandoah Valley. As a result, most of those areas had been thoroughly devastated and ravaged, and much of Virginia's countryside lay desolate, barren, and war-worn.

All during this time, Scottsville had been spared the physical destruction so common elsewhere in the State. However, the town's insulation from the stark realities of war ended abruptly in March of 1865 – only a month before the end of the conflict – as an indirect consequence of orders from



*General Philip Sheridan*  
Courtesy of National Archives,  
Washington, DC

Union General Ulysses S. Grant.

At the beginning of 1865, Grant developed a grand three-part strategy to end the war. First, the Union Army of the Potomac would maintain unrelenting pressure on Lee's army around Richmond and Petersburg; second, General Sherman's Army of Tennessee was to attack northward from Georgia into the Carolinas towards Lee's rear; and third, Sheridan's Army of the Shenandoah, consisting of 10,000 cavalymen in two divisions, was ordered to raid south from Winchester up the Valley, and destroy the Virginia Central Railroad and the James River and Kanawha Canal. If successful, Sheridan's cavalry was then to cross the James River, cut Lee's communications west of Richmond, and join up with Sherman. It was Sheridan's force that

would end the peaceful solitude of Scottsville.

After leaving Winchester on February 27, 1865, and passing through Harrisonburg, Staunton, and Waynesboro against minimal opposition, Sheridan's men spent the weekend of March 3-4-5 (Friday, Saturday, Sunday) in Charlottesville doing considerable damage to the city and surrounding area. On Monday morning, March 6, Sheridan split his command into two columns, both with the mission of destroying the James River and Kanawha Canal and continuing the destruction of the Virginia Central Railroad.

Sheridan and General George Armstrong Custer's 3<sup>rd</sup> Division headed southwest along the Charlottesville-Lynchburg rail line and parallel road, wreaking havoc on the way. At the same time, the three brigades of Major General Thomas C. Devin's 1<sup>st</sup> Division took the road south to Scottsville and the James River. The plan was for the two divisions to reunite near the town of New Market (now Norwood) in Nelson County. The combined force would then cross the James River, continue on south, and eventually meet Sherman's Army moving north.

The first of Devin's contingent to arrive in Scottsville on Monday afternoon was Brigadier General Alfred Gibbs' Reserve Brigade consisting mainly of men from Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island. The other two brigades of the 1<sup>st</sup> Division, accompanied by Generals Devin and Wesley Merritt, passed through

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town later that day and proceeded up-river along the canal tow path and river road to Howardsville where they camped for the night.

Records indicate that most of the physical damage in and around Scottsville was inflicted between Monday afternoon and mid-day Tuesday by troopers of the Reserve Brigade assisted by at least one Michigan regiment from Stagg's Brigade. In his official report of events in Scottsville on March 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>, General Gibbs wrote the following: *On the 6<sup>th</sup> marched without transportation to Scottsville, twenty-one miles (from Charlottesville); worked until midnight destroying James River Canal, locks, boats with subsistence supplies, and bridges. 7<sup>th</sup>, burned woolen factory with a large quantity of cloth, candle factory with a large amount of candles, lard-oil, etc; large five-story flouring mill, with flour, corn, and wheat; a large manufactory, machine shops, and tobacco warehouses. I regret that a few private dwellings, close to the mill, were more*

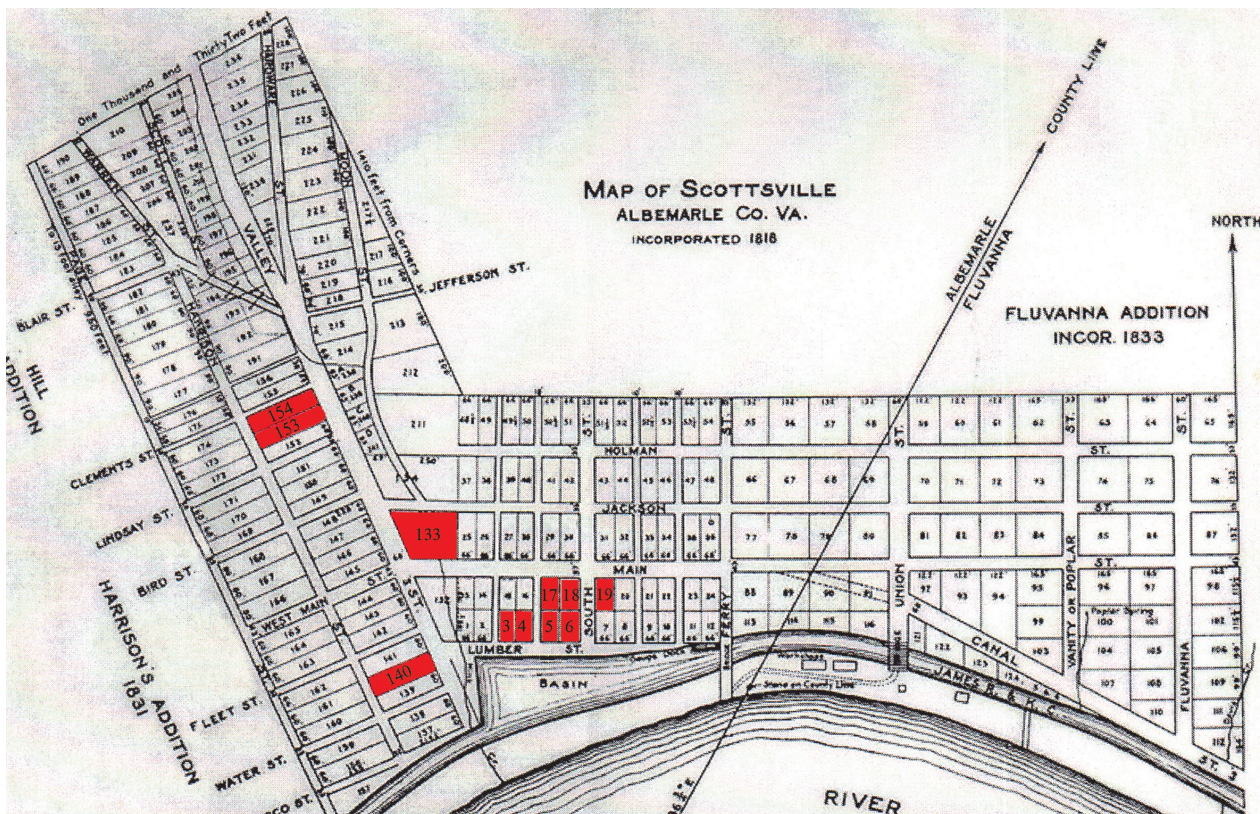
*-or-less charred by the intense heat. No accident or loss of life, however, occurred.*

The residents of Scottsville would probably have taken issue with Gibbs' assertion that only incidental damage was inflicted upon the civilian population. Albemarle County tax records indicate that buildings were burned on at least eleven lots in Scottsville, and not all were of any military value. Seven of the buildings were located on lots south of Main Street and adjacent to the canal basin and consisted of a collection of lumber warehouses, some unidentified structures, and even the nearby Columbian Hotel. Far greater damage was reported by the Chief Engineer of the James River and Kanawha Canal who reported 26 houses "burnt" in Scottsville.

Gibbs also did not mention the fact that numerous eyewitness accounts confirm that the soldiers administered significant plundering, pillaging, and other atrocities upon many people in

town. Livestock (especially horses), forage, fowl, and food supplies were especially vulnerable to theft. A typical example of the destruction in Scottsville was described by a soldier in the 7<sup>th</sup> Michigan Cavalry of Stagg's Brigade: *Here we captured a fleet of canal boats loaded with supplies for Richmond. The fact that the Union forces were near at hand caused the Rebel officer in charge to call on the citizens of the town to carry away all the flour and meat they could, so we found many houses filled with these commodities, which were either destroyed by us or issued in smaller quantities to the negroes and poor whites, who were in starving condition. Many queer experiences came from searching the houses for concealed goods. One healthy woman was apparently at the point of death on a bed made on top of seven barrels of flour.*

A little publicized facet of Civil War history is that even the few citizens in the South, who professed loyalty to



R.B. Moon Map, 1873. Scottsville lots in red sustained "Injury by fire" during Sheridan's Raid according to the 1866 Albemarle Tax Book (Lots 3,4,5,6,17,18,19, 133, 140, 153, and 154). (Continued on page 6)

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the Federal government, were also subjected to indiscriminate depredations by the invading Union armies. As a result, in 1871 Congress created the Southern Claims Commission to investigate such cases throughout the secessionist states and to compensate purported “loyalists” for any damages they may have suffered.

One individual from Scottsville with Union sympathies who made a request for compensation was Joseph W. Wyatt, an ex-slave, who had bought his freedom from his owner in Mathews County for \$650. He testified that he had lived in Fluvanna until June 1862 before moving to Scottsville, and that he had no connection to the Confederate Government. Wyatt submitted a claim on May 24, 1874, for \$254.62 for a horse, 14 barrels of flour, 150 pounds of bacon, 15 pounds of sugar, 50 pairs of shoes and boots, 4 bed blankets, and 2 counterpanes. He was paid \$138.62.

Wyatt owned a small store or grocery in Scottsville that was probably located on the north half of Lot No. 131 near the Canal Basin. He also owned a boat and a horse that were used on the James River & Kanawha Canal between Scottsville and Richmond.

According to Wyatt, he was never molested because of his Union sentiments except in one case when Zack Lewis drew a knife on him.

The petitioner reported that his property was forcibly taken from him by “Union soldiers belonging to General Sheridan’s Army about the 5<sup>th</sup> (sic) day of March 1865.” “There were a large number of soldiers engaged. I did not hear the name of any officer. The Army was camped at the place (Scottsville) and remained in camp

about four (4) days when they left they went in the direction of Richmond.”

George W. Dillard was another self-proclaimed Union loyalist with a Scottsville address, who claimed to have suffered damages from Sheridan’s men and that he had been appointed Postmaster by the Grant Administration. Dillard submitted a claim on October 30, 1872, for \$300 for one large sorrel horse and one bay horse taken about March 9.

Dillard stated that he lived on a hundred-acre farm about four miles from Scottsville (believed to have been near Glendower) and “had nothing against the Government of the United States.” Furthermore, “I was threatened to be hanged and shot on account of my Union sentiments. I had a pistol pointed at my head and a knife at my side. This was on the wayside on my return one day from Charlottesville – all because I was a loyal man to the U. S. government.” He added that that he “sympathized with the Union and not with the Rebellion when war broke out,” and that “When the Union army came here under Genl Sheridan, I threw my smokehouse and mill open to them and told them to help themselves and I made no charge for this. They seeing my willingness to give them these supplies, the officer restrained the troops. I didn’t know the officer’s name or rank, but he was from Philadelphia and belonged to Genl Sheridan’s command.” Dillard went on to say that he had placed his son at Virginia Military Institute “to keep him out of the army and told him rather than go into service he must come home and I would send him through the lines.”

In spite of several witnesses, who supported Dillard’s account, his petition was rejected. The investigators concluded that “there is no evidence

that he did or suffered anything for the cause,” and furthermore, he had sold five mules and a horse to the Confederate States government.

Virginia Moore wrote that in addition to his farm near Glendower, Dillard also owned the old house known as “Chester” located on the hill above Scottsville. However, he apparently did not move to “Chester” until after the war. Dillard’s pro-Union allegiance must not have been much of a hindrance to his acceptance in the community because in the post-war years, he went on to become a prominent citizen and property owner in and around Scottsville.

The last of Devin’s horsemen departed Scottsville by mid-day Tuesday (March 7) and moved up the James River along the canal tow path and parallel river road, damaging the canal and ravaging the countryside along their path. Devin’s and Custer’s divisions rendezvoused at New Market (Norwood) on the James River on Wednesday. Here, Sheridan was forced to change his plans because of the flooded stream. Blocked from crossing the swollen river, he ordered both divisions to turn east, back down the canal and towards Richmond. In doing so they would make a more complete destruction of the canal and Virginia Central Railroad and eventually reunite with Grant’s army at Petersburg.

Alas, Sheridan’s change of plans was bad news for Scottsville as the mile-long column of 10,000 horsemen, about 2000 former slaves, and wagon train moved back downriver and once again through Scottsville. The first contingent of blue-clad troopers moved through town late on Wednesday on their way to Columbia, but it was not until the next day, March 9<sup>th</sup>, that the bulk of the column made it to Scottsville. This day

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might be appropriately termed “the second occupation,” because Sheridan and all three of his subordinate generals (Merritt, Devin, and Custer) and perhaps two brigades totaling over three thousand men bedded down in or near the town that night.

Several first-person accounts record that Sheridan and Custer spent the night at the old Lewis home known as “Cliffside,” while Merritt appropriated the Beal home known as “Old Hall” on Harrison Street, and Devin reportedly commandeered “Driver’s Hill” on the east side of town. A resident of “Cliffside” chronicled the intruder’s visit as follows: *In marched Sheridan with his men, and pitching their tents around made our yard a veritable camping ground.....he and his men pillaged, plundered, stealing and burning as they went, tore the place all to pieces then setting fire to the carriage house and barns and other out*

*houses, burned them to the ground.....*

Although Federal reports suggest that most of the destruction in Scottsville took place during the first occupation on Monday and Tuesday, the statements of several eyewitnesses about the burning of houses, barns, and personal property at “Cliffside” indicate that the marauders were not idle during the second occupation on Thursday and Friday. This destructive behavior seems especially noteworthy and deserving of condemnation in view of the fact that all four commanding generals were present at the time.

Peace was finally restored to the community by about noon on Friday (March 10<sup>th</sup>) when the last of the Yankee cavalry departed on their way down river to Columbia. But the people had suffered lasting physical and emotional damage that would persist for generations. The little town on the banks of the James River and the James River and Kanawha Canal had endured

almost five days of total or partial occupation by an invading army bent on destruction. But, like the proverbial phoenix, Scottsville would eventually rise again from the ashes of Sheridan’s raid.

All wars are horrible and destructive to both humans and to property. And, while it is easy to condemn Sheridan and his men for their actions against innocent civilians, it is worth remembering that by 1864-65, the Civil War had entered into a new phase that would be characterized as “total war.” In addition to their primary mission of destroying Confederate military resources and infrastructure, the tired and hungry invaders “lived off the land” for most of their expedition.

In retrospect, however, perhaps the saddest thing about the raid was that it was completely unnecessary and had no impact whatsoever on the outcome of a war that would be over within a month.