

Urban Destruction during the Civil War

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Abstract and Keywords

During the American Civil War, Union and Confederate commanders made the capture and destruction of enemy cities a central feature of their military campaigns. They did so for two reasons. First, most mid-19th-century cities had factories, foundries, and warehouses within their borders, churning out and storing war materiel; military officials believed that if they

interrupted or incapacitated the enemy's ability to arm or clothe themselves, the war would end. Second, it was believed that the widespread destruction of property—especially in major or capital cities—would also damage civilians' morale, undermining their political convictions and decreasing their support for the war effort.

Both Union and Confederate armies bombarded and burned cities with these goals in mind. Sometimes they fought battles on city streets but more often, Union troops initiated long-term sieges in order to capture Confederate cities and demoralize their inhabitants. Soldiers on both sides were motivated by vengeance when they set fire to city businesses and homes; these acts were controversial, as was defensive burning—the deliberate destruction of one's own urban center in order to keep its war materiel out of the hands of the enemy.

Urban destruction, particularly long-term sieges, took a psychological toll on (mostly southern) city residents. Many were wounded, lost property, or were forced to become refugees. Because of this, the destruction of cities during the American Civil War provoked widespread discussions about the nature of “civilized warfare” and the role that civilians played in military strategy. Both soldiers and civilians tried to make sense of the destruction of cities in writing, and also in illustrations and photographs; images in particular shaped both northern and southern memories of the war and its costs.

Keywords: [Civil War](#), [cities](#), [urban destruction](#), [military strategy](#), [battle](#), [siege](#), [civilians](#), [retaliation](#), [defensive burning](#), [civilized warfare](#), [Civil War visual culture](#)

Cities as Military Targets

The antebellum era was a time of rapid urbanization in the United States. Large, densely populated cities and towns had proliferated on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line by 1861. During the Civil War, Union and Confederate commanders made the capture or destruction of enemy cities a central feature of their campaigns. Why?

First, all acts of warfare involve both battles between armies and attempts to gain control over the enemy's territory—its cities, towns, agricultural fields, and infrastructure.¹ By advancing into and occupying enemy territory, armies destroyed the geographic integrity of their adversaries, a major step in destroying their will to fight.² Second, most Americans assumed that the fall of capital cities—Washington, D.C., and Richmond, Virginia—would mean victory for one side and defeat for the other. How could the body politic function without its nerve center? Third, because antebellum cities had manufacturing and storage centers within their borders, bombarding and setting fire to cities also destroyed factories, foundries, supply depots, and warehouses. Interrupt or incapacitate the enemy's ability to arm, feed, and clothe themselves and the war ends.³ Fourth, burning cities damaged civilian morale, “bringing the enemy to the point where it can go no further physically, emotionally, or ideologically.”⁴



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Figure 1. “Richmond, Virginia. Ruins of Gallego Mills” (1865). Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C. LOT 4162-F, no. 10.

Both Union and Confederate armies bombarded and burned cities with all of these goals in mind. Sometimes Union troops fought battles on city streets but more often, they initiated long-term sieges in order to capture Confederate cities. Vengeance motivated some soldiers to destroy cities while self-defense drove others—throughout the war, Confederate soldiers deliberately set fire to their own urban centers in an attempt to keep valuable war materiel out of the enemy’s hands. Cities were vital assets and targets for both armies during the American Civil War; whoever controlled them determined the outcome of the conflict.

Destroyed in Battle: Fredericksburg

From Jackson, Mississippi, to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, battles and skirmishes carried over into the streets of small towns. But as important as urban centers were to campaign strategies, generals on both sides tried to avoid long-term battles in cities. The urban landscape was not conducive to fights between large armies, and the presence of civilians was problematic for the development of battle strategy. Fredericksburg, Virginia, was the only southern city to host a major battle between the Civil War’s largest armies. For several days in early December 1862, the Union’s Army of the Potomac and the Confederacy’s Army of Northern Virginia clashed in a battle that ruined many of the city’s central neighborhoods.

Fredericksburg’s location—midway between the major urban centers of Richmond and Washington, D.C.—made it a strategic target, and way station for Union troops under General Ambrose Burnside marching southward in an attempt to take the Confederate capital. The city was also a manufacturing center, producing guns and ammunition for Confederate forces. Burnside’s troops gathered across the Rappahannock from Fredericksburg in late November 1862 but could not cross; the bridges were burned and Burnside’s pontoon boats were late arriving. The delay gave Confederate general Robert E. Lee’s soldiers time to march to the city and establish battle lines. By early December both

Union and Confederate artillery and infantry were posted on high hills, with the city in-between.



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Figure 2. "Bombardment of Fredericksburg, Va., by the Army of the Potomac, Commanded by General Burnside, Thursday, December 11, 1862." Frank Leslie's Famous Leaders and Battle Scenes of the Civil War (New York: Mrs. Frank Leslie, 1896).

Courtesy of the private collection of Roy Winkelman.

In the foggy, early morning hours of December 11, the Union army (which had finally received the pontoon boats) began to assemble their bridge. When the fog lifted, "suddenly, Crack! crack! crack! From a hundred muskets tells us the ball is opened."⁵ General Lee had posted three Confederate regiments within the city and on the bank in front of Fredericksburg to contest the crossing. These soldiers fired upon Union engineers assembling the pontoon boats and then upon federals streaming across the completed bridge.⁶ These actions provoked Burnside to order the bombardment of the city. Union general Edwin Vose Sumner, whom Burnside had tapped to command the bombardment, gave notice to the mayor on December 11, and the next day civilians began to stream out of Fredericksburg, making their way behind Confederate lines, Union batteries then turned upon the town, rendering it "untenable by any considerable body."⁷

By mid-afternoon, most of the central business district along Princess Anne Street was on fire. A "huge column of dense black smoke tower[ed] like a monument above the livid flames, that leap and hiss and crackle, licking up the snow upon the roofs with lambent tongues, and stretching like a giant."⁸ As Union troops began to pour through the city, the streets divided their ranks and discipline broke down; they wandered down thoroughfares and clambered over rubble, losing their regiments in the growing dark and drifting smoke. The bombardment had knocked many buildings to pieces, revealing their contents to soldiers who almost immediately set to work looting them.



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Figure 3. "Views in Fredericksburg, Va., Showing Destruction of Houses by Bombardment on December 13, 1862" (1862). Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C., LOT 4165-G, no. 12.

The accepted laws of warfare condemned the sacking of captured cities.⁹ But as was often the case during the American Civil War, the "confusion and excitement" of warfare undermined traditional modes of behavior and belief.¹⁰ For close to twenty-four hours, Union soldiers—tempted by the chaos and seeking revenge for the attack on their engineers at the pontoon bridge—broke into businesses and homes alike, smashing furniture, mirrors, and crockery and dragging chairs, couches, desks, and pianos out into the streets.¹¹ After this melee, Union forces moved across the city and formed battle lines at its western edge, at the bottom of Marye's Heights. The next day, several successive charges against this strong Confederate position failed, and the defeated Federals retreated back through the town and across the Rappahannock.

Confederate soldiers retaking Fredericksburg on December 15 were astonished at the level of destruction in the city. Four days of bombardment, battle, and looting had brought stunning changes to Fredericksburg. "Oh! what a ruined town," Confederate soldier Francis Coker lamented. "It is a nice old place, nearly as large as Macon. It is now battered to pieces & parlors & furniture destroyed."¹² For southerners, the ruins were evidence of Confederate sacrifice and Yankee barbarism. For northerners like New Hampshire soldier Napoleon Perkins, the city's ruins seemed a "terrible sight." But military necessity dictated its destruction; "such is war," Perkins lamented.¹³ The rubble of Fredericksburg represented the significance of southern cities in Civil War campaigns, and the violent destructiveness of urban warfare that both armies sought to avoid for the remainder of the war.

Under Siege: Civilians in Cities

The shelling of Fredericksburg was brief and occurred before the battle. However, most sieges during the Civil War included long-term, regular bombardment and blockading, and

they were initiated after battles failed to force the capitulation of the soldiers who defended urban centers. Beginning in 1863, the Union army increasingly used siege tactics against southern cities. Soldiers established positions around their targets and cut off their communication and supply lines; then they began throwing shells into protective fortifications (and often, city streets) multiple times a day.

The sieges of Vicksburg, Mississippi (May–July 1863), and Atlanta, Georgia (July–September 1864), were the Union's most successful assaults on Confederate cities. The former secured control of the Mississippi River while the latter brought a vital center of railroad traffic and war production under Union occupation; Atlanta then became the staging ground for Union general William Tecumseh Sherman's March to the Sea. The extended sieges of Charleston, South Carolina (August 1863–February 1865), and Petersburg, Virginia (August 1864–April 1865), put great stress on soldiers and civilians alike, but these cities, defended by strong works and intact supply lines, resisted until the last months of the war, when Confederate soldiers abandoned them in the face of oncoming Union soldiers.

During all of these sieges, bombardment destroyed significant portions of the urban landscape. The inability of artillerists to hit precise targets from more than two miles away meant that shells aimed at military targets often struck houses and churches instead. In August 1864, after the Army of the Potomac had settled into the siege of Petersburg, for example, a correspondent for the *Richmond Enquirer* reported that the steady shelling of the city had not injured many residents, but it had done considerable damage to their property. Shot and shell plunged down through roofs and into parlors and bedrooms. "Panttries have been invaded," he wrote, "and unmerciful crashes sent breaking and ringing through piles of crockery and rows of jars, whose precious contents still swim or stick in sweet ruin upon the indented floors and caved in shelves that mark the scenes of the disaster."¹⁴



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Figure 4. "Petersburg, Virginia. Ruins of Houses" (1865). Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C. LC-B811-3038.

In cities under siege, civilians who could not afford to evacuate lived in a constant state of anxiety, never knowing when and where the bombs would fall. The more than 22,000 shells that rained down on Vicksburg over the course of two months forced residents to take refuge in churches, cellars, or in caves that they paid workers anywhere from \$20 to \$50 to dig into the city's many steep hillsides.



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Figure 5. Adalbert John Volck, “Cave Life In Vicksburg” (1864). Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C. Illus. in E468.7.V65 1863 Stern Coll (Rare Book RR).

Some families decorated their caves with carpets, tables, and beds. Despite these comforts and the novelty of “cave life,” the siege took its toll. One anonymous woman who detailed her experiences in Vicksburg in her diary, for example, was chagrined to note that after more than a month of artillery barrages, she had lost her nerve. Several shells had exploded around her house and as she retreated to her cave, “for the first time I quailed. [...] I seemed to realize that something worse than death might come; I might be crippled, and not killed.” She resolved to “summon that higher kind of courage—moral bravery—to subdue my fears of possible mutilation.”¹⁵

Carrie Berry and her family experienced a similar sense of terror under siege. Berry, who was ten years old and living in Atlanta when Sherman’s troops arrived outside the city in July 1864, wrote in her diary that, “We can hear the canons [*sic*] and muskets very plane [*sic*], but the shells we dread. One has busted under the dining room which frightened us very much.” Almost every day, she and her family heard the shells whistling into the city and then ran in a panic to their cellar. But even here they did not feel safe, as the shells “fell so thick and fast.” The Berry family moved several times during the siege of Atlanta, looking not for large houses to live in but large cellars.¹⁶ The constant threat of injury or death and the dislocations of multiple moves profoundly affected the Berrys and other Atlanta residents living under siege in the fall of 1864.

This was one of the goals of siege warfare: to demoralize the enemy’s civilians and thereby undermine their support for the war effort. Constant shelling was effective in achieving these ends, as was cutting the city off from supply routes. As General Ulysses S. Grant shut down all access to Vicksburg in the early summer of 1863, civilians increasingly feared they would

starve. The Vicksburg diarist noted that she “never understood before the full force of those questions—What shall we eat? What shall we drink? And wherewithal shall we be clothed?” In the decades before the war, the industrial and transportation revolutions had brought an increasingly diverse range of foodstuffs and material goods to urban markets. Wartime sieges, however, almost immediately created a provisioning crisis. The Vicksburg diarist sent her enslaved woman Martha to “run the gauntlet to buy the meat and milk once a day,” a terrifying experience for Martha that produced very little in the way of food or drink. “I send five dollars to market each morning and it buys a small piece of mule-meat,” she wrote. She could not bring herself to eat it, so she subsisted on cornbread and a mixture of rice and milk for weeks.¹⁷

After months of living under siege, most civilians greeted the capitulation of their cities with relief. The residents of Vicksburg were eating white bread and reveling in quiet evenings by July 4, 1863. Carrie Berry’s family went back to work with “glad spirits” in early September 1864 after Union troops moved in to occupy Atlanta.¹⁸ But the end of a siege also meant the end of slavery: the entrance of Union soldiers into fallen cities functionally emancipated urban slaves. White residents were chagrined by these developments; emancipation was another form of destruction that took from them their wealth in slaves. And although sieges were harrowing experiences for enslaved people and free blacks as well (they suffered alongside their white masters and mistresses, starving and thirsty and in constant fear for their lives—imagine Martha, having to dodge shells on her daily run to the market in Vicksburg), the capitulation of southern cities brought freedom, so they welcomed Union soldiers with open arms.¹⁹

But Union occupation did not mean the end of civilian suffering. In many cities, including Vicksburg, Union officials “expelled citizens who refused to renounce their loyalty to the rebellion or to comply with Federal regulations.”²⁰ Less than a week after the siege of Atlanta ended, Carrie Berry’s family heard about Sherman’s order requiring all of Atlanta’s civilians, both white and black, to evacuate the city. “Every one I see seems sad,” Berry wrote in her diary. “The citizens all think that it is the most cruel thing to drive us from our home [...] Mama seems so troubled she can’t do any thing. Papa says he don’t know where on earth to go.”²¹ Her father was ultimately able to secure a job that allowed the family to stay, but many of the young girl’s family and friends, and many formerly enslaved men and women, left Atlanta for points northward in late September 1864.²²

As civilians abandoned their homes in the wake of sieges they joined hundreds of thousands of other refugees on the road. These large populations of black and white refugees lived lives of constant instability as they moved to places unknown to them, seeking aid from strangers. Some of them ended up in other southern cities; many refugees from Charleston, South Carolina, who had left when the artillery barrages began in the summer of 1863, moved to Columbia—which was then destroyed in a massive conflagration after Sherman’s troops arrived there in February 1865. The refugee situation put stress on individuals, and on rural and urban communities. It “radically reshaped customary relations of power in the realm of spatial mobility,” creating new kinds of social conflict on the road that remade southern culture after the war.²³

Northerners generally accepted the validity of the siege as a military tactic, but southerners deplored the destruction, terror, starvation, and forced evacuations that sieges brought to urban communities. The southern press especially excoriated Sherman for attacking

Atlanta, a city he knew to be filled with women and children. Confederate general John Bell Hood was outraged by Sherman's evacuation order, which he thought transcended "in studied and ingenious cruelty, all acts ever before brought to my attention in the dark history of war."²⁴ Despite the scorn heaped upon him for his actions in Atlanta, Sherman did not regret them. In his view, the siege was a military necessity; it was a tool that armies had to use in order to win. "War is cruelty," he famously wrote, "and you cannot refine it."²⁵ But white civilians across the South neither forgave nor forgot the ways that sieges destroyed their dignity and their wealth, and victimized women and children. They called for revenge, for retaliation in kind. Some military commanders answered that call.

Soldiers and the Ruins of Revenge

Vengeance is a powerful emotion and impetus to action. For Civil War-era military officials, the practice of retaliation moved beyond passion and became a legitimate military tactic. Retaliation was understood as an official, compensatory response to "barbarous outrages" on the part of the enemy; it was an act of "protective retribution" that would conceivably prevent the enemy from executing "barbarous outrages" in the future.²⁶ Both Union and Confederate soldiers used these justifications to explain their destruction of enemy homes and outbuildings across the South and in parts of the North and West. But the most spectacular moment of urban destruction as a punishment occurred during the summer of 1864 in southern Pennsylvania, at the hands of Confederate soldiers under orders from General Jubal Early.

With the Army of Northern Virginia pinned at Petersburg and Union general David Hunter attempting to occupy the Shenandoah Valley, General Lee sent Jubal Early's corps to the valley. In July Early learned that Hunter had been engaging in "his favorite mode of warfare" in the Shenandoah: burning the homes of prominent Confederates. As he noted in his *Memoir*, Early quickly "came to the conclusion that we had stood this mode of warfare long enough" and on July 26, 1864, he dispatched two brigades and a battery of artillery under John McCausland to Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. He instructed McCausland to "demand of the municipal authorities the sum of \$100,000 in gold, or \$500,000 in United States currency, as a compensation for the destruction of the houses and their contents." Early had previously wrested money and supplies from a number of towns in Maryland using this strategy.

Early informed McCausland that if he was unsuccessful in securing the ransom he was "to lay the town in ashes, in retaliation for the burning of those houses and others in Virginia, as well as for the towns which had been burned in Southern States."²⁷ McCausland and his men reached Chambersburg on July 30, converging at the town square. As residents came to meet them, McCausland read Early's order aloud and asked the City Council to collect the money. Chambersburg's leaders had sent their capital northward already, but they pretended this was not the case in order to stall for time, hoping for Union forces in the area to come to their aid.

McCausland soon lost patience, however, and within a few hours he ordered his men to set fire to the town at different locations.²⁸ The flames spread quickly despite the relatively calm day. The Confederates were impressed with the conflagration, which was "one of surpassing grandeur and terror." The tall columns of black smoke "rose up to the very skies;

around it were wrapped long streams of flames, writhing and twisting themselves into a thousand fantastic shapes.” Many observers noted how the fire seemed to create its own kind of weather. “Whirlwinds” of fire lifted clothing, wood, bricks, and furniture into the air and hurled them across the city.²⁹



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Figure 6. “The Ruins of Chambersburg—Bank and Franklin Hotel.

A civilian committee later determined that more than 500 of Chambersburg’s 800 buildings were destroyed: 278 residences and places of business, 98 barns and stables, and 173 outbuildings of various kinds.³⁰ General Early and other Confederates believed—or rather, hoped—that the burning of Chambersburg would “open the eyes of the people of other towns at the North, to the necessity of urging upon their government the adoption of a different policy.”³¹ As the editors of the *Richmond Enquirer* crowed ecstatically, “We have lit in Chambersburg a blaze that will arrest the view of the Northern people, and illustrate the destruction of villages, homesteads, and towns in every Southern state.”³²

Of course, many northerners—and especially the inhabitants of Chambersburg—protested against the burning as a legitimate war tactic. Technically, this order was not justified militarily as retaliation, for it did not directly punish David Hunter, who had fired Confederate houses.³³ In addition, Early’s destruction of an *entire* northern city as retribution for the destruction of a handful of southern homes seemed like a punishment way out of proportion to the crime, an excessive and “monstrous” act of violence. However, as military theorist (and Union general) Henry Halleck argued in 1864, “in times of war, it might not be possible to punish the individual responsible for egregious acts,” and in those cases a larger body could be held responsible. In wartime, Halleck reasoned, “a city, an army, or an entire community, is sometimes punished for the illegal acts of its rulers or individual members.”³⁴ Chambersburg in particular proved that wartime retaliation was inherently contradictory: it subverted its own stated goal of preemptive violence and provoked additional acts of vengeance. For example, Union soldier Allen Campbell, who took part in the destruction of Atlanta’s business district several months later considered that “*Chambersburg* is dearly paid for.”³⁵

John T. Trowbridge, a northern journalist who toured Chambersburg in the fall of 1865, was initially shocked to see the “skeletons of houses burned by the Rebels,” the “empty eye-sockets” of their windows staring at him and yawning with “their fanged and jagged jaws.” But he quickly overcame his aversion to the ruins and saw them as a sign of future strength. “There is no loss without gain,” he wrote. “Chambersburg will in the end be greatly benefited by the fire” and so “let it be with our country; fearful as our loss has been, we shall build better anew.”³⁶ With state funds and philanthropic donations, the residents of Chambersburg did in fact rebuild their town. Architects and carpenters set to work almost immediately and

reconstructed most of the Diamond by 1870.³⁷ City residents put up several memorials to the burning—a memorial slab and a fountain—and today they annually reenact its destruction on July 30. Chambersburg’s ruins may no longer exist in reality, but they do exist in collective memory, reminding residents and visitors of the costs of vengeance enacted in the name of war.

Defensive Burning as a Military Tactic

Retaliation was a controversial wartime tactic that military theorists spent considerable time debating. But one element of urban warfare that was not much discussed in military codes or army regulations was the deliberate annihilation of one’s own cities. Confederate troops stationed in several large urban centers—Charleston, Columbia, Atlanta, and Richmond—burned arsenals, warehouses, and factories before they withdrew in the face of the Union army’s overwhelming numbers. One of the only southern cities *entirely* destroyed using defensive burning was Hampton, Virginia. It was the first large-scale urban ruin of the conflict, and it revealed the various and important roles that cities—and emancipation—played in the American Civil War.

In May 1861, after Virginia’s residents had voted to secede, Union general Winfield Scott transferred two regiments of Massachusetts soldiers to Fortress Monroe (a large military installation in the Virginia Peninsula), increasing the size of its garrison to 12,000 men. Confederate commanders determined that they could not hold the town of Hampton—which sat across Mill Creek from the fort—against these Union “invaders.” They advised its white residents to evacuate the town and to take all of their moveable property—including slaves—with them.³⁸

When preparations for an evacuation began, however, many of Hampton’s enslaved people did not accept their own removal; instead, they fled to Fortress Monroe. On May 24, 1861, three enslaved men named Shepard Mallory, Frank Baker, and James Townshend, all of whom belonged to Colonel Charles Mallory, arrived at the fort, appealing for sanctuary. When Confederate major John Cary of the Virginia Artillery appeared the next day and demanded the return of these three men under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Union major-general Benjamin Butler denied the request, informing Cary that because Virginia had seceded, its slaveholders no longer had claims under federal policies like the Fugitive Slave Act. This led to Butler’s famous decree that slaves, because they could be employed to dig fortifications and engage in other acts of hostility against the Union, would be considered “contraband of war” and subject to confiscation at will.



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Figure 7. "Contraband, Fortress Monroe" (1861). Union Patriotic Envelope, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C. LOT 14024, no. 5.

By late July 1861 almost 1,000 fugitive slaves who had confiscated themselves gathered around Fortress Monroe, and Butler wrote a series of letters and reports to Secretary of War Simon Cameron asking for orders regarding their housing and care.³⁹ Several of these letters and reports were published in the northern papers, one of which found its way into the hands of General John B. Magruder, who was in command of Confederate forces on the Peninsula. After reading one of Butler's reports on August 6, Magruder concluded that the Union general considered slaves to be free and "would colonize them at Hampton, the home of most of their owners." Therefore, Magruder later wrote, "I determined to burn it at once."⁴⁰

Just before midnight on August 7, 1861, four companies of men, many of whom lived in the vicinity, ran through the streets of Hampton with torches, setting fire to the business district and the houses that fanned out from the core of the town.⁴¹ A correspondent for the Associated Press posted at the fort reported that "the glare of the conflagration was so brilliant that I was enabled to write by it" and that a strong south wind fanned the flames. The fire raged all night, he noted, and "a more sublime and awful spectacle has never yet been witnessed." Observers reported that around 500 buildings had been reduced to piles of rubble, and that only seven or eight were left standing. The next morning, nothing was left "to mark the once beautiful Hampton but the charred, towering chimneys" while "smoke ascending from the ruins" wafted lazily in the air.⁴²



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Figure 8. William McIlvaine, "The Ruins of Hampton, Va." (1862). Marion S. Carson Collection, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C., DRWG/US-McIlvaine, no. 6 (AA size).

Virginians viewed this act of urban destruction as a civilian "sacrifice" rather than a military strategy, a patriotic act of devotion to the Confederacy on the part of its citizens. The fire would keep the town's buildings out of northern hands, they reasoned, and the smoking heaps of rubble would stand as a permanent monument to their defiance of Union authority. Northerners, on the other hand, argued that, "a more wanton and unnecessary act than the burning, [...] could not have been committed."⁴³ For Union commanders and many northern civilians, Hampton's ruins became evidence of what they believed to be the typically rash

and violent nature of Confederate soldiers, and the victimization of southern civilians by their own protectors. Thus, quite early in the war, northerners and southerners were using urban ruins to dispute the nature of “civilized warfare,” and the role of emancipation in waging it.

By April 1862, the ruins of Hampton had begun to disappear, their brick and stone fragments taken and used to build shelters for Union soldiers and for the fugitive slaves who flocked to the area in escalating numbers. This is the irony of Hampton’s destruction: Magruder had burned the town in August 1861 in part because he feared its use as a camp for runaway slaves. By the time that John Trowbridge visited Hampton (after his visit to Chambersburg) in 1865, he “found it a thrifty village, occupied chiefly by freedmen.”⁴⁴ Magruder’s fears had come to pass and yet it was he (not Butler) who had made it so.

The burning of Hampton, like the destruction of Fredericksburg, Vicksburg, Atlanta, and Chambersburg, reveals that cities that came under fire during the Civil War provoked disputes about battles and sieges, and acts of retaliation and defense as military tactics. The presence of civilians in cities complicated these discussions, and helped to shape critiques of urban destruction as a military tactic.

The Aesthetics of Ruined Cities and the Lost Cause

Photographs and illustrations also influenced this wartime discourse of destruction. Ruins photograph beautifully: their sharp edges and empty spaces make them ideal aesthetic subjects. Northern wartime photographers like Alexander Gardner, Timothy O’Sullivan, and George N. Barnard, all of whom worked for New York City photographic studio owner Mathew Brady, created spectacular images of urban ruins, mostly in 1865. Photographers could not yet capture motion, so it was left to newspaper illustrators and lithograph production companies like Currier and Ives to depict the leaping flames and roiling smoke of cities on fire.

During the 1860s, image production and reproduction technologies advanced rapidly and therefore images of burning and ruined cities—Harpers Ferry, Hampton, Fredericksburg, Vicksburg, Chambersburg, Atlanta, Columbia, Charleston, and Richmond—were increasingly accessible and affordable. Due to the dominance of northern printing and photographic establishments before and during the war, the bulk of the images were produced by northerners and for northern audiences. Thus, images of destroyed cities usually narrated Union military conquests and victories, suggesting that urban destruction was integral to the ultimate Union victory.

For Confederates, these images conveyed tragedy and suffering. The South’s urban ruins—in photographs and illustrations, and in novels and later, films—became bedrock symbols within the narrative of the Lost Cause, a popular southern memory of the war that depicted Union soldiers as rapacious, evil invaders intent on annihilating all vestiges of the “Old South,” including its architecture and its genteel white womenfolk. One popular novel published in the postwar period, William Henry Peck’s *The M’Donalds; or, the Ashes of Southern Homes: A Tale of Sherman’s March* (1867), for example, used urban destruction as both a thematic and a plot device. Throughout the novel, Union troops pursue Mrs.

Preston M'Donald and her daughter Myrtis from Atlanta to Columbia. As these cities burn down around them, the M'Donald women have their moments of fear and anxiety, but they survive these conflagrations and remain staunch believers in the Confederacy and its purpose. Thus, southerners dismissed one of the central justifications of urban destruction during the war: the demoralization of southern civilians. In southern popular culture after the war, white women in burning cities became embodiments of the Lost Cause and of the increasingly popular adage that "The South Shall Rise Again."⁴⁵

The visual and narrative power of urban ruins meant that the extent of the damage done to southern cities was often exaggerated. Photographers tightly focused their images, using a block or two of rubble to stand in for the entire city; they also emphasized destroyed cities in their collections of "war views." Sometimes they deliberately misled viewers regarding the cause of urban destruction. George N. Barnard, for example, took many photographs of the ruins of Charleston, South Carolina, in the year after it fell to Union troops. He did not distinguish between his images of the sections of the city damaged in the siege of 1863–1865, and the sections of the city leveled by a fire that swept through the business district in December 1861—before any Union troops had set foot in the city.⁴⁶



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Figure 9. George N. Barnard, "Charleston, S.C. View of ruined buildings through porch of the Circular Church (150 Meeting Street)" (1865). Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C. LC-B811-3448 [P&P] LOT 4163

Northern photographers were invested in shaping a triumphant narrative using urban ruins; the southern press, on the other hand, saw such images as a way to critique northern military tactics as "uncivilized" and "barbaric." The emphasis that both sides placed on destroyed cities and the profusion of images of them in the pages of photographic albums and magazines created the impression that many southern cities were entirely annihilated during the Civil War. But in most cases, "ruined" cities experienced the loss of only about one-third of their buildings, concentrated in the business districts that were producing war materiel.

But these ruins still existed. Their material reality speaks to the centrality of cities in Civil War military strategy; to the many ways in which soldiers turned buildings into rubble; to the suffering of black and white civilians enduring these acts; and to the diverse meanings all Americans found in the urban ruins of war.

Discussion of the Literature

Just as urban centers were attractive targets for Union and Confederate armies in the 1860s, cities have become an increasingly popular topic in Civil War history. Since the late 20th century studies of northern and southern cities in wartime have proliferated. Some, such as George Rable's *Fredericksburg! Fredericksburg!* (2002), are military histories of cities under siege and in battle that determine the role they played in Civil War campaigns.⁴⁷

However, as J. Matthew Gallman has noted in his article "Urban History and the American Civil War" (2006) many recent Civil War "city biographies" relate homefront stories of "recruiting and conscription, emancipation and racial tensions, voluntarism and fund raising, inflation and labor strife, politics and dissent."⁴⁸ Civil War cities need not be southern to capture historians' attention. Many recent histories focus on urban centers north and west of the Mason-Dixon Line: Boston, Chicago, New York City. Adam Arenson's *The Great Heart of the Republic: St. Louis and the Cultural Civil War* (2011), for example, reveals how St. Louis—which was northern, southern, and western—endured all manner of attacks and counterattacks during the war, remaining in contention until 1865.⁴⁹

Those historians interested in the southern cities have many urban centers to choose from—and these cities represent a wide range of wartime experiences. Not every southern city was targeted for destruction, or assaulted. As William Warren Rogers's *Confederate Home Front: Montgomery during the Civil War* (1999) suggests, many southern cities survived relatively unscathed, far away from the major theaters of the war. Scholars like Chester Hearn, in *When the Devil Came Down to Dixie: Ben Butler in New Orleans* (1997), and those whose essays are gathered in LeeAnn Whites's and Alecia P. Long's edited collection *Occupied Women: Gender, Military Occupation, and the American Civil War* (2009), focus on the experiences of white and black civilians in Confederate cities occupied by Union forces. These cities were fertile ground for political, gendered, and racial conflicts that interest social historians of the Civil War.⁵⁰

Cities surrendered without any shots fired were rarely destroyed afterward. But those that were positioned between armies or were located at vital transportation junctions were often partially or wholly destroyed. These urban centers have attracted a great deal of attention from scholars. Some, such as Nelson Lankford (*Richmond Burning: The Last Days of the Confederate Capital* [2002]) and Marion Brunson Lucas (*Sherman and the Burning of Columbia* [2000]), have written detailed local histories of the several days before and after a city's destruction while others such as A. Wilson Greene, in *Civil War Petersburg: Confederate City in the Crucible of War* (2006) and Wendy Hamand Venet, in *A Changing Wind: Commerce and Conflict in Civil War Atlanta* (2014), discuss destruction as part of longer chronologies of wartime urban development.⁵¹

Cities have sometimes entered the narratives of scholars interested in the emergence of "hard war" strategies (deliberate acts of violence against civilians), especially on the part of

the Union Army. Charles Royster's *The Destructive War: William Tecumseh Sherman, Stonewall Jackson, and the Americans* (1991) opens with a vivid chapter on the burning of Columbia, South Carolina, and Mark Grimsley's *The Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy toward Southern Civilians, 1861–1865* (1995) examines hard war policies as they applied to both urban and rural residents of the Confederacy. More recently, Megan Kate Nelson studies the burnings of Hampton, Chambersburg, and Columbia to exemplify one of four kinds of wartime destruction in *Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War* (2012).⁵²

Despite this recent upsurge in urban studies of warfare, there is clearly more work to be done in this field. More comparative studies of southern cities under fire are needed in order to assess the commonalities and explain the differences in their experiences. Most important is the need for more studies of destroyed cities during Reconstruction. Historians have examined many facets of racial and political Reconstruction in the postwar period (necessarily and much to our benefit) but they do not often address the issue of actual reconstruction—the rebuilding of cities partially destroyed in the war. Even the wartime city biographies and texts that address destruction more broadly mention Reconstruction only in passing, or in final chapters or epilogues. William A. Link's recent *Atlanta, Cradle of the New South: Race and Remembering in the Civil War's Aftermath* (2013) has begun to answer important questions that historians need to ask in other locations: How was urban rebuilding financed? How long did it take? Did these projects provide work for freedpeople? Did some cities take longer to rebuild than others? How did wartime destruction shape the racial and political histories of Reconstruction, and the broader sweep of the history of American capitalism?⁵³

Studies of Civil War cities—destroyed or left intact—have and can continue to illuminate local circumstances *and* speak to broader military, social, and cultural narratives of the conflict. They suggest the diversity of wartime experiences across the nation, and the important roles that cities played in American life in the 19th century.

Primary Sources

The historical researcher can find evidence of urban destruction in tens of thousands of military records and Civil War–era letters and diaries, penned by Union and Confederate soldiers and civilians, and in hundreds of photographs, illustrations, lithographs, and engravings.

Military records, particularly those orders and reports compiled in the U.S. War Department's *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Union and Confederate Armies* (commonly referred to as the *O.R.*) provide information about the timing and extent of urban destruction. They can also offer insights into individual and collective motivation, circumstances that drove most of the discussions about the burning of cities in wartime. In these documents, military officials explain and justify their actions, often in reference to another set of texts: laws of warfare. Union general Henry W. Halleck was one of the most prominent military theorists in the antebellum period, and his *Elements of International Law and Laws of War* (1866), building on a long history of military law, argued for the destruction of enemy property as a justifiable tactic; both Union and Confederate military and government officials used these laws to shape and defend their actions. Northern officials

found the need to clarify some matters, however, in the context of a civil war. In 1863, the Union Adjutant General's office published [General Orders No. 100. Instructions for the Government of Armies of the United States in the Field](#), written by Francis Lieber.

Military leaders were not the only Americans who thought and wrote about urban destruction. Civil War diaries, letters, and reminiscences abound with descriptions of wartime bombardments and fires, and the ruins they produced. Soldiers also wrote about the cities they shelled, laid siege to, pillaged, and burned. Massachusetts officer [Charles Fessenden Morse's](#) descriptions of the burning of Atlanta in his letters to his brother and sister are remarkably candid about the Union army's plans for "that devoted city," and Morse's qualms about the siege of Atlanta during the battles of July and August 1864.

Many of the most vivid accounts of Civil War urban destruction come from the pens of civilians (especially women) living in urban areas on fire. In Columbia, South Carolina, for example, [Emma LeConte](#), Mary Whilden, Grace Brown Elmore, and Robert Gibbes wrote detailed accounts of the defensive burning of cotton on the streets as Confederate forces evacuated, the entrance of General Sherman's troops into the city, and the subsequent conflagration that consumed most of Columbia's business district in February 1865. After Sherman's troops departed, William Gilmore Simms collected the accounts of city residents and took a survey of the destruction. His *The Capture, Sack, and Destruction of the City of Columbia* (1865) contains a wealth of information about the progress of the fire and the property destruction that resulted.

As Simms roamed the streets of Columbia the days and months after the fire, recording the words of city residents, the photographer [Richard Wearn](#) documented the destruction of the city in a series of images he later published as cartes de visite (small images printed on paper cards). These photographs show the extent of the city's ruins, and they informed the vociferous debate about who exactly was to blame for the fire (a debate that continues today). One must examine both print and visual primary sources with a careful eye, of course. Union and Confederate Army records often emphasized military necessity and ignored wanton destruction. In their shock and dismay, civilians living in besieged and destroyed cities regularly exaggerated the extent of the damage. Soldiers wielding torches alternately crowed about it, blamed others, or downplayed their participation. Visual images—even photographs, which many people tend to assume convey "the truth" in ways that illustrations do not—are the work of artists who shaped their images to suit aesthetic preference or political ideologies. But if we read these primary documents with this in mind, we can see them as evidence of wartime urban destruction and also as signs of popular belief and emotional investments in these acts in Civil War America.

Further Reading

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