

Author Karen Stokes Discusses “Civilians in Sherman’s Path”

“Stories of Courage amid Civil War Destruction”

Hits: 5737

Americans need to be reminded of the terror and destruction that can be unleashed on innocent civilians by an invading army with leaders unrestrained by Biblical standards and soldiers desiring revenge with no compassion for the suffering of women, children and the elderly. Such was the situation when over sixty thousand troops under command of Union General William T. Sherman cut a 40 mile wide swath of total destruction across South Carolina, murdering, raping, stealing and destroying everything they could not carry with them.

Confederate troops had withdrawn from the state in the face of an overwhelming enemy force, hoping to minimize damage to the state. The mayor of Columbia had surrendered the city to Gen. Sherman with a solemn promise that the city and its remaining women, children, and elderly would not be harmed.

Sherman lied!

South Carolina historian and archivist Karen Stokes has collected graphic first person accounts by civilians who experienced these atrocities through letters, diaries, memoirs and newspaper accounts, much of which is corroborated by Sherman’s own officers and soldiers.

Karen Stokes discussed her recent book published by The History Press (www.historypress.net) earlier this year, at the August meeting of the Sixteenth Regiment, Sons of Confederate Veterans, in Greenville.

Stokes noted that several publications thoroughly cover the military aspects of Sherman’s destructive activities in South Carolina, but her work deals only with the impact on the civilian population, especial women, children and the elderly as well as clergy.

Stokes described her book as the story of “thousands of men and women, young and old, black and white, who felt the impact of what Gen. Sherman called ‘the hard hand of war’.”

“Of all the states in the Confederacy,” Stokes wrote, “South Carolina suffered the most under the army commanded by Sherman.” From his own writings, Sherman acknowledged that he did not believe “that any and every people have a right to self-government.” He contended that the Federal government could rightfully take the property, and even the life, of anyone who did not submit to its authority. From the record of their behavior, it is clear that many of the Union troops under his command shared the same attitude toward the Declaration of Independence and Constitution of the United States as their misguided General.

Author Karen Stokes includes in her book reports of two raids on upstate towns after the war officially ended and Gen. Lee surrendered to Grant.

Caroline Howard Gilman, wife of Rev. Samuel Gilman, was born in Boston, moved to Charleston

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published in Greenville, when President Lincoln ordered the shelling of Charleston.

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In early May, 1865, after Gen. Lee’s surrender, Mrs. Gilman writes in a letter that she and her children were seated at the dinner table in Greenville rejoicing that the war was over and their friends were no longer in mortal combat.

“What was our horror then to hear a cry from the servants, ‘The Yankees are coming!’

“Presently, a negro man in a cart, whipping his horse to a full gallop came tearing along to escape, but in vain, a dozen of the enemy’s cavalry came after him and fired...”

Union troops had reentered the state looking for President Jefferson Davis.

“Clusters of horsemen passed, and looked, and rode on without a question while in other houses they were searching for arms and horses. One man came on foot, while I was leaning over the porch rails, and demanded coffee. I said, I had been without coffee two months. ‘ I hear you have coffee,’ said he, ‘and if I find it is so, I’ll be damned if I don’t burn your house down.’

“The raiders, about two hundred in number went to Main Street and opened the Commissary stores, robbed the bank, pillaged every article of clothing from the rooms of the Ladies’ Association, and then proceeded to private houses and property.”

Stokes also includes in her book the story of Reverend James Petigru Boyce, who served as chaplain in the Confederate Army and after the war founded the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Greenville that later moved to Louisville, Kentucky. Rev. Boyce was a victim of the Yankee raid on Greenville after the war had ended.

The Yankees had been informed that Mrs. Boyce had a lot of jewelry including diamonds.

“After seizing the horses, they proceeded to plunder the entire house, bursting open closets and wardrobes and trunks, and flinging everything about, in the search for valuable things. Then they held a pistol to Dr. Boyce’s head, and demanded to know what had become of his wife’s diamonds and other jewelry.”

The valuables had been taken away by Boyce’s brother but he refused to say where they were if he knew. The angry Yankees eventually departed taking many things with them.

The Times Examiner will publish a more complete review of South Carolina Civilians in Sherman’s Path at a later date. In the meantime, you may purchase a copy at the Confederate Bookstore on Boyce Avenue in the Petigru Historic District of Greenville, or order a copy from the History Press.