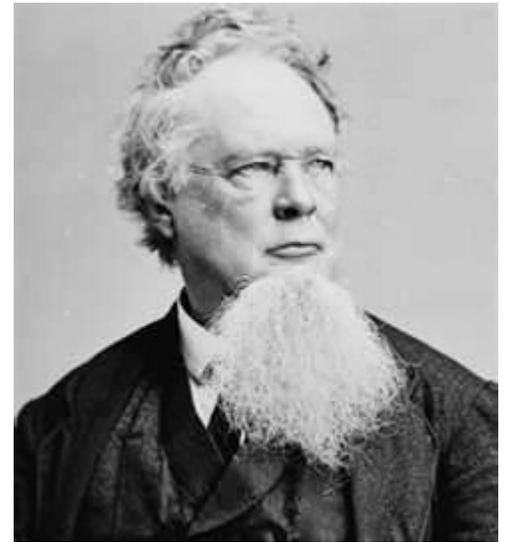


The Treatment of the Negroes By Sherman's "Bummers"

by William Gilmore Simms

Something should be said in respect to the manner in which the negroes were treated by the Federals while in Columbia, and as regards the influences employed by which to beguile or take them from their owners. We have already adverted to the fact that there was a vast difference between the feelings and performances of the men from the West, and those coming, or directly emanating, from the Eastern States. The former were adverse to a connection with them; but few negroes were to be seen among them, and they were simply used as drudges, grooming horses, bearing burdens, humble of demeanor and rewarded with kicks, cuffs and curses, frequently without provocation. They despised and disliked the negro; openly professed their scorn or hatred, declared their unwillingness to have them as companions in arms or in company at all.



Several instances have been given us of their modes of repelling the association of the negro, usually with blow of the fist, butt of the musket, slash of the sword or prick of the bayonet.

Sherman himself looked on these things indifferently, if we are to reason from a single fact afforded us by Mayor Goodwyn. This gentleman, while walking with the general, heard the report of a gun. Both heard it, and immediately proceeded to the spot. There they found a group of soldiers, with a stalwart young negro fellow lying dead before them on the street, the body yet warm and bleeding. Pushing it with his feet, Sherman said, in his quick, hasty manner:

"What does this mean, boys?"

The reply was sufficiently cool and careless. "The d---d black rascal gave us his impudence, and we shot him."

"Well, bury him at once! Get him out of sight!"

As they passed on, one of the party remarked:

"Is that the way, General, you treat such a case?"

"Oh!" said he, "we have no time now for courts martial and things of that sort!"

A lady showed us a coverlet, with huge holes burned in it, which she said had covered a sleeping negro woman, when the Yankees threw their torches into her bed, from which she was narrowly extricated with life.

Of the recklessness of these soldiers, especially when sharpened by cupidity, an instance is given where they thrust their bayonets into a bed, where they fancied money to be hidden, between two sleeping children -- being, it is admitted, somewhat careful not to strike through the bodies of the children.

The treatment of the negroes in their houses was, in the larger proportion of cases, quite as harsh as that which was shown to the whites. They were robbed in like manner, frequently of every article of clothing and provisions, and where the wigwam was not destroyed, it was effectually gutted. Few negroes having a good hat, good pair of shoes, good overcoat, but were incontinently deprived of them, and roughly handled when they remonstrated. These acts, we believe, were mostly ascribed to Western men. They were repeatedly heard to say: "We are Western men, and don't want your d---d black faces among us."

When addressing the negro, they frequently charged him with being the cause of the war. In speaking to the whites on this subject, especially to South Carolinians, the

cause was ascribed to them. In more than one instance, we were told: "We are going to burn this d---d town. We've begun and we'll go through. *This thing began here, and we'll stack the houses and burn the town.*"

A different role was assigned to, or self-assumed by, the Eastern men. They hob-a-nobbed with the negro, walked with him, and smoked and joked with him. Filled his ears with all sorts of blarney; lured him, not only with hopes of freedom, but all manner of license. They hovered about the premises of the citizens, seeking all occasion to converse with the negroes. They would elude the guards, slip into the kitchens, if the gates were open, or climb over the rear fence and converse with all who would listen. No doubt they succeeded in beguiling many, since nothing is more easy than to seduce, with promises of prosperity, ease and influence, the laboring classes of any people, white or black. To teach them that they are badly governed and suffering wrong, is the favorite method of demagogueism in all countries, and is that sort of influence which will always prevail with a people at once vain, sensual and ignorant. But, as far as we have been able to see and learn, a large proportion of the negroes were carried away forcibly. When the beguiler failed to seduce, he resorted to violence.

The soldiers, in several cases which have been reported to us, pursued the slaves with the tenacity of blood-hounds; were at their elbows when they went forth, and hunted them up, at all hours, on the premises of the owner. Very frequent are instances where the negro, thus hotly pursued, besought protection of his master or mistress, sometimes voluntarily seeking a hiding place along the swamps of the river; at other times, finding it under the bed of the owner; and not leaving these places of refuge till long after the troops had departed.

For fully a month after they had gone, the negroes, singly or in squads, were daily making their way back to Columbia, having escaped from the Federals by dint of great perseverance and cunning, generally in wretched plight, half-starved and with little clothing. They represented the difficulties in the way of their escape to be very great, and the officers placing them finally under guards at night, and that they could only succeed in flight at the peril of life or limb. Many of these were negroes of Columbia, but the larger proportion seemed to hail from Barnwell. They all sought passports to return to their owners and plantations.

This article was extracted from *William Gilmore Simms, [The Sack and Destruction of Columbia, South Carolina](#)* (Columbia, South Carolina: Power Press of the Daily Phoenix, 1865).

William Gilmore Simms, (1806-1870) is a native of Charleston, South Carolina. He was born April 17, 1806. His father, who bore the same name, was of Scots-Irish descent, and his mother, Harriet Ann Augusta Singleton, was of a Virginia family, which came early to the state and was found in the Revolutionary times on the Whig side. William Gilmore Simms, the elder, having failed in Charleston as a merchant, removed to Tennessee, where he held a commission in Coffee's brigade of mounted men, under the command of Jackson, employed in the Indian war against the Creeks and Seminoles. His wife died while our author, the second son, was in his infancy, and he was left in the absence of his father to the care of his grandmother.

Though his early education derived little aid from the pecuniary means of his family, which were limited, and though he had not the benefit of early classical training, yet the associations of this part of his life were neither unhappy nor unproductive, while his energy of character and richly endowed intellect were marking out an immediate path of mental activity and honor. Choosing the law for a profession, he was admitted to the bar at Charleston at the age of twenty-one. He did not long practise the profession, but turned its peculiar training to the uses of a literary life. His first active engagement was in the editorship of a daily newspaper, the Charleston City Gazette, in which he opposed the prevailing doctrines of nullification; he wrote with industry and spirit, but being interested in the paper as its proprietor, and the enterprise proving unsuccessful, he was stripped by its failure of the limited patrimony he had embarked in it. The commencement of his career as an author had preceded this. He wrote verses at eight years of age, and first appeared before the public as a poet, in the publication, about 1825, of a Monody on Gen. Charles Cotesworth Pinckney. A volume, Lyrical and other Poems, appeared from his pen, in 1827, at Charleston, followed by Early Lays the same year. Another volume, The Vision of Cortes, Cain, and other Poems, appeared in 1829, and the next year a celebration, in verse, of the French Revolution of 1830, The Tricolor, or Three Days of Blood in Paris. In 1832 Simms visited New York and became acquainted with the growing literary circle emerging in that city. Upon the death of his wife, Simms remarried, this time to a daughter of a wealthy planter and was elected to the state legislature. Simms was also a novelist and essayist, but foremost a poet, and an acclaimed one. http://www.southernslavery.com/articles/treatment_of_negroes.htm