

# The Devastation Of The South

One cannot understand why many Southerners and others feel the war was unjust without understanding the extent of the devastation that federal forces inflicted on the South during the war. When a whole region experiences the kind of devastation and brutality that the South suffered, accounts of such wrongs are passed down from parents to children for many generations. Today nearly all textbooks either ignore or gloss over the cruel type of warfare that federal armies waged in the South and the amount of destruction and suffering those armies caused. So, before I conclude this article, I'd like to take just a moment to examine the nature and consequences of the devastation that federal forces inflicted on the South.

Kenneth Davis:

Along with the horrible number of deaths and crippling wounds, much of the seceded South was left in smoldering ruins. The Southern economy was practically nonexistent. The dollar value of the destruction was staggering. Although cotton resumed its significant position almost immediately, it was another twenty-five years before the number of livestock in the South returned to prewar levels. . . .

William T. Sherman always maintained that the devastatingly destructive war he had waged on the Confederacy shortened the war and saved soldiers' lives. His good intentions went unappreciated by the victims of his ruthlessness. For many along his path, after Sherman's troops departed, there was literally nothing left on which to support a family. Houses were looted. Those animals that were not taken by the Union troops were killed. Under Sherman's "scorched earth" policy, any item that could be used for farming or manufacturing was destroyed, the grim "justice" for what Sherman viewed as treason.

In the aftermath of the war, the entire Confederacy, save sections west of the Mississippi that had been spared the massive battles, was devastated--physically, economically, even spiritually. The postwar South was probably worse off than Europe after either of the world wars of this century. Because of Sherman's notorious destruction of the southern railroads, many of Lee's defeated soldiers had to walk home from Virginia. Many found that their homes had been burned. In some cases, entire towns and even whole counties had been evacuated.

Don't Know Much About the Civil War, pp. 411, 425

Randall and Donald:

On the nature and extent of devastation at the South the historian's sources present a sad record. By the end of the war the eleven seceding states had 32 percent fewer horses than in 1860, 30 percent fewer mules, 35 percent fewer cattle, 20 percent fewer sheep, and 42 percent fewer swine. . . . Omitting slave property from his calculations, Professor Sellers concludes that "southern wealth in 1860 had shrunk in value at the end of the war by 43 percent". . . .

The South had been broken by the war. Lands were devastated. Proud plantations were now mere wrecks. Billions of economic value in slaves had been wiped away by emancipation measures without that compensation which Lincoln himself had admitted to be equitable. . . . Accumulated capital had disappeared. Banks were shattered; factories were dismantled; the structure of business intercourse had crumbled. In Atlanta, Columbia, Mobile, Richmond, and many other places great havoc had been wrought by fire.

The interior of South Carolina, in the wake of Sherman's march, "looked for many miles like a broad black streak of ruin and desolation--the fences all gone; lonesome smoke stacks, surrounded by dark heaps of ashes and cinders, marking the spots where human habitations had stood; the fields along the road wildly overgrown by weeds, with here and there a sickly looking patch of cotton or corn cultivated by negro squatters. In the city of Columbia . . . a thin fridge of houses encircled a confused mass of charred ruins of dwellings and business buildings, which had been destroyed by a sweeping conflagration." The Tennessee valley, according to the account of an English traveler, "consists for the most part of

plantations in a state of semi-ruin, and plantations of which the ruin is for the present total and complete. . . . The trail of war is visible throughout the valley in burnt up gin-houses, ruined bridges, mills, and factories, of which latter the gable walls only are left standing, and in large tracts of once cultivated land stripped of every vestige of fencing. . . . Borne down by losses, debts, and accumulating taxes, many who were once the richest among their fellows have disappeared from the scene, and few have yet to take their place."

The Civil War and Reconstruction, pp. 517, 543-544

McPherson:

The war not only killed one-quarter of the Confederacy's white men of military age. It also killed two-fifths of southern livestock, wrecked half of the farm machinery, ruined thousands of miles of railroad, left scores of thousands of farms and plantations in weeds and disrepair. . . . Two-thirds of assessed southern wealth vanished in the war. The wreckage of the southern economy caused the 1860s to become the decade of least economic growth in American history before the 1930s. As measured by the census, southern agricultural and manufacturing capital declined by 46 percent between 1860 and 1870, while northern capital increased by 50 percent. In 1860 the southern states had contained 30 percent of the national wealth; in 1870, only 12 percent.

The Battle Cry of Freedom, pp. 818-819

Simkins:

When surrender stopped the invader, physical destruction was apparent in many places. Lands were devastated, plantations wrecked. Accumulated capital had disappeared in worthless stocks, bonds, and currency. The banks had failed; factories had been dismantled; and the structure of business intercourse had crumbled. Two billion dollars invested in slaves had been wiped out, without the compensation which Lincoln himself had regarded as equitable. . . . Cotton worth \$30,000,000 had been confiscated by federal Treasury agents. . . .

The eighty miles from Harpers Ferry to New Market were described by a Virginia farmer as "almost a desert." "We had," he explained, "no cattle, hogs, sheep, or horses or anything else. The fences were all gone. . . . The barns were all burned; chimneys standing without houses, and houses standing without roofs, or doors, or windows". . . .

In December 1865, an estimated 500,000 white people in three states of the lower South were without the necessities of life, and some of them even starved. . . .

Fifteen years after the war only the frontier states of Texas, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Florida had as many acres under cultivation as in 1860. . . .

The spirit of vengeance was strong in the victorious North at first.

Because Southerners refused to be friendly, the federal army of occupation resorted to irritating retaliations. Women required to go to military headquarters for any favor were forced to take ironclad oaths of national loyalty. The wearing of Confederate uniforms was forbidden and when this order was enforced among men who had no other clothes, scenes of unforgivable humiliation resulted.

Church buildings were seized and turned over to Northern denominations, and ministers were not allowed to preach unless they agreed to conduct "loyal services, pray for the President of the United States, and for Federal victories." Direct refusal of Protestant Episcopal clergymen to substitute in their liturgy the name of the President of the United States for that of the President of the Confederate States resulted in the closing of churches and the dispersal of congregations.

In addition, there was the burden of discriminatory war taxes and the confiscation laws of Congress. Federal Treasury agents threaded their way through the occupied areas seizing 3 million out of the 5 million bales of cotton which had not

been destroyed. They corruptly enriched themselves. "I am sure," said the Secretary of the Treasury, "that I sent some honest agents South; but it sometimes seems very doubtful whether any of them remained honest for very long." A special tax of from 2.5 to 3 cents a pound on cotton yielded the federal treasury \$68,000,000. Because of its effects on the economy of a prostrate region, this levy was called by the United States Commissioner of Agriculture "disastrous and disheartening in the extreme." As soon as the federal troops got a foothold in the South, property was seized and sold for nonpayment under the Direct Tax Act.

A History of the South, pp. 247-251, original emphasis

In conclusion, I hope that in this article I have provided some balance to the common, and I believe inaccurate and unfair, descriptions of the antebellum South, of the Confederacy, and of the events that led to the Civil War. When judged by any fair, reasonable comparison, the South was just as deserving of its independence as were the original thirteen colonies. Similarly, the South had just as much right as did the North to be governed by a government of its own choosing. The Confederacy had just as much right to exist as did any other nation of its day.

It's been said that those who fail to learn from the mistakes of history are bound to repeat them. But how can we learn from history if our version of history is markedly one-sided and incomplete? Sometimes the facts of history can be unsettling, especially when those facts have been widely suppressed. Robert Catlett Cave expressed my feelings about discussing such facts:

I acknowledge . . . the obligation to heal dissensions, allay passion, and promote good feeling; but I do not believe that good feeling should be promoted at the expense of truth and honor. I sincerely desire that there may be between the people of the North and the people of the South increasing peace and amity, and that, in the spirit of genuine fraternity, they may work together for the prosperity and glory of their common country; but I do not think the Southern people should be expected to sacrifice the truth of history to secure that end.

The Men in Gray, Crawfordville, Georgia: Ruffin Flag Company, 1997, reprint, p. 17

<http://www.namsouth.com/viewtopic.php?p=163&sid=0f811da9b8806f4b799e425b8ee4068a>