

# The Burning of Darien, Georgia - June 11, 1863

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*One of the most controversial acts of the War Between the States (or Civil War) took place when Union troops torched defenseless Darien, Georgia.*



### Burning of Darien

The Adam Strain Building, seen here, was gutted by the fires and repaired ten years later. It is made of tabby



**First African Baptist Church** This church, one of the oldest for African Americans, was burned by Union soldiers and later rebuilt.

# The Burning of Darien, Georgia - June 11, 1863

*"This dirty piece of business"*

The burning of historic [Darien, Georgia](#), was one of the most controversial acts of the War Between the States (or Civil War).

On June 11, 1863, Union troops raided the town on the Georgia coast in a frenzy of fire, looting and destruction. There were no Confederate troops in Darien, only a few civilians who fled for their lives as their city was burned around them.

The 54th Massachusetts, a famed regiment of black Union soldiers, was among the units that took part in the destruction. Col. Robert Gould Shaw, the regiment's commander, called the burning of Darien "a barbarous sort of warfare" and protested to superiors in the Union army about the role the 54th had been ordered to take in the raid.

The responsibility for the raid on Darien was fixed by Shaw on his immediate superior, Col. James Montgomery of the 2nd South Carolina U.S. Colored Troops (later the 34th USCT). Before the war he had taken part in the guerrilla warfare of the "Bleeding Kansas" episodes.

According to a letter written by Shaw to his family shortly after the raid, he reached [St. Simons Island](#) with the 54th Massachusetts on June 9, 1863. On the next day he was approached by Col. Montgomery who asked how long Shaw would need to prepare his men for an expedition. Shaw promised his men would be ready to move in 30 minutes.

Eight companies of the 54th left St. Simons Island by steamboat that same day. As they left the island they were joined by two other steamboats carrying Col. Montgomery, five companies from his regiment and two sections of light artillery from Rhode Island. The three transports were escorted by the gunboat *Paul Jones* of the U.S. Navy.

At 8 a.m. the next morning - June 11, 1863 - the boats steamed into the mouth of the Altamaha River. Shaw reported that cannon were fired indiscriminately at houses along the river as the boats advanced, despite the fact that some likely sheltered women and children. The expedition reached Darien at 12 noon.

The Union commander rained cannon fire on the town, even though no shot had been fired at his men and no Confederate soldiers were in sight. One shell, according to Shaw, passed through the dress of a woman but miraculously did not injure her.

With the gunboat watching from the river, the three U.S. Army transports tied up to the wharves on the Darien riverfront and the Union soldiers went ashore. Montgomery ordered them to loot the homes and shops of the town of all of their furniture and movable goods, all of which were to be brought to the boats. This took several hours for the soldiers to accomplish.

Once the work was done, Col. Montgomery ordered the burning of the town. Shaw told his family that he objected to the order, telling his commander that he "did not want the responsibility of it." Montgomery shouldered the responsibility himself and directed that his orders be carried out. As women, the elderly and children watched from afar, their homes went up in flames.

According to Shaw, his men also participated in the burning because they were ordered to do so. The excuse Montgomery gave him for the destruction was that Southerners must be "swept away by the hand of God, like the Jews of old."

"This makes me very much ashamed of myself," Shaw wrote on the day after the raid. He also called it a "dirty piece of business" that brought dishonor on his regiment.

Confederate authorities were shocked by the merciless attack on civilians. Captain William A. Lane of the 20th Battalion Georgia Cavalry reported that when he saw smoke coming from Darien he tried to intervene with a detachment of only 15 men. He realized he stood no chance, however, and withdrew back away from the town without firing a shot.

On June 13, 1863, two days after the raid, Captain W.G. Thomson of the same unit reported to Brig. Gen. Hugh Mercer:

*...I have to report that the enemy have burnt Darien to the ground; there is only one church and two or three small buildings standing...They came up the river in three gunboats, shelling as they came along.*

The only prisoners taken by the Federals, he reported, were two women who were later released.

Among the buildings burned in Darien by the Union troops was the historic First African Baptist Church. Founded in 1822, it was one of the oldest African American churches in the South.

Col. Shaw later complained to superiors about the wanton destruction of Darien and the war he and his men had been ordered to carry out against women and children. He died 25 days later while leading the 54th Massachusetts in the failed attack on Battery Wagner near [Charleston, South Carolina](#).

The Confederates did lodge a formal protest against the burning of Darien. Gen. P.G.T. Beauregard included the incident in a litany of incidents of vandalism he attributed to Union soldiers in a letter to Brig. Gen. Quincy A. Gillmore of the U.S. Army.

Despite Beauregard's complaint that the burning of Darien and other towns were war crimes, Col. Montgomery was not removed from his post. He commanded a brigade at the [Battle of Olustee, Florida](#) on February 20, 1864. He resigned his commission later that year and returned home to Kansas where he died on December 6, 1871.

The site of the Union landing at Darien is now a waterfront park, where the ruins of historic warehouses and other structures can be seen. The Adam Strain Building near Broad and Screven Streets was gutted in the fire but survives. The Grant House at Adams (GA 99) and Rittenhouse Streets is the only residence not destroyed by the fires. It is still a private home.



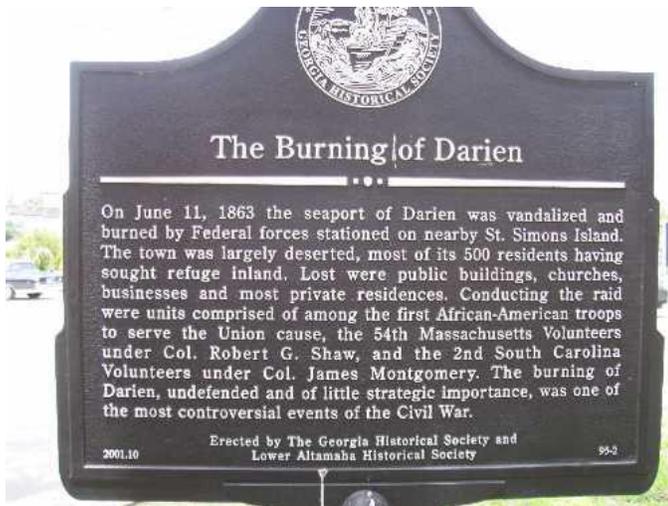
### Darien Waterfront

Darien had been a small but active port before the war. Now a destination for heritage and eco-tourism, it remains a center for the Georgia shrimp industry.

<http://www.exploresouthernhistory.com/darienburning.html>

## The Burning of Darien - Historical Marker

The marker was unveiled on the lawn of Darien City Hall, September 22, 2001. The marker was made possible by The Georgia Historical Society and The Lower Altamaha Historical Society.



### The Burning of Darien

On June 11, 1863 the seaport of Darien was vandalized and burned by Federal forces stationed on nearby St. Simons Island. The town was largely deserted, most of its 500 residents having sought refuge inland. Lost were public buildings, churches, businesses and most private residences. Conducting the raid were units comprised of among the first African-American troops to serve the Union cause, the 54th Massachusetts Volunteers under Col, Robert G. Shaw, and the 2nd South Carolina Volunteers under Col. James Montgomery. The burning of Darien, undefended and of little strategic importance, was one of the most controversial events of the Civil War.

Robert G. Shaw, and the 2nd South Carolina Volunteers under Col. James Montgomery. The burning of Darien, undefended and of little strategic importance, was one of the most controversial events of the Civil War.

Erected by the Georgia Historical Society and the Lower Altamaha Historical Society