

The Burning Sheridan in the Shenandoah Valley

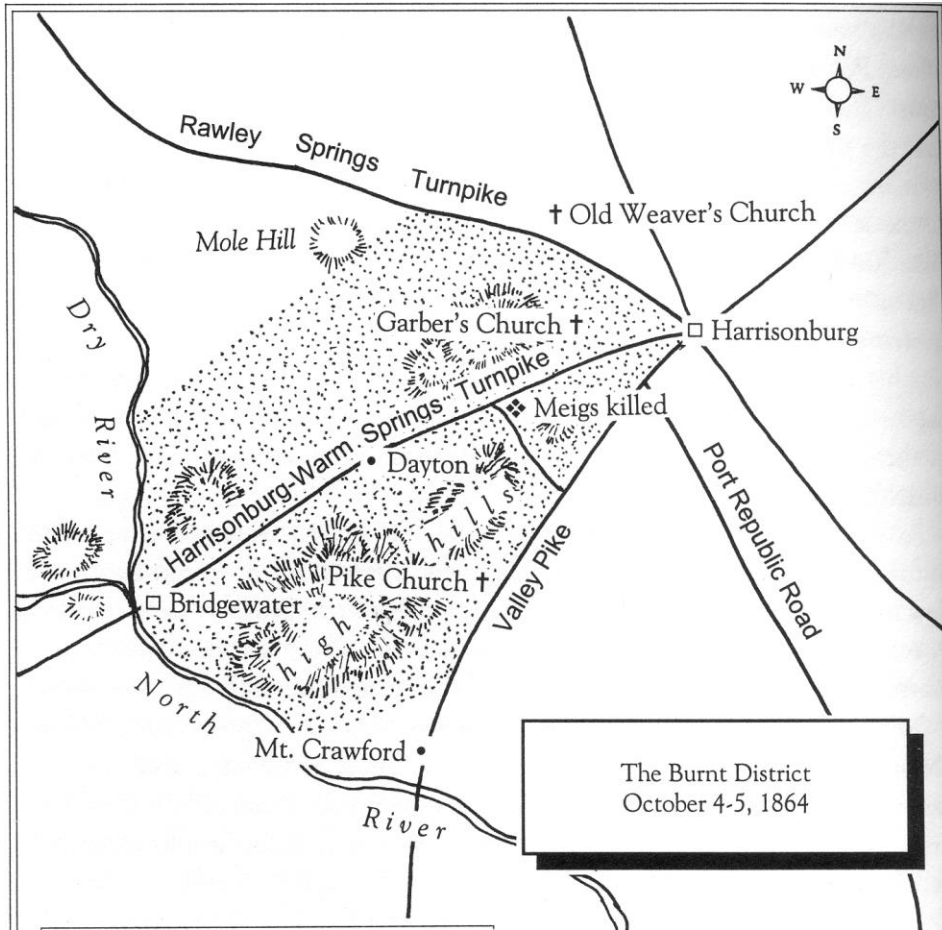
John Heatwole

"The Civil War has rightly been called the defining moment in the life of the Nation; the Burning was the defining moment in the life of the Valley" So writes John Heatwole at the outset of his momentous recounting of the Union's policy of destruction in the Shenandoah Valley in the fall of 1864. Written and exhaustively researched by a Valley man whose ancestors endured the unforgettable assault, *The Burning* finally gives this pivotal campaign its due.

On the strength of newly uncovered firsthand accounts, both Northern and Southern, Heatwole's detailing of the offensive deals a crippling blow to misinterpretations and errors that have been perpetuated for years. Led by Maj. Gen. Philip Sheridan, Union soldiers began a systematic destruction of the Valley in September 1864 in an attempt to neutralize the bounty that fed the Southern cause. They burned barns, mills, factories, and standing crops; livestock were either driven away or slaughtered on the spot. Some families hid livestock in their homes in an effort to save them, but many lost everything they owned.

Calling Heatwole's research "superb," *Publishers Weekly* hails *The Burning* for "bringing home to readers the savagery that often arose during America's Civil War." Indeed, its vivid imagery engulfs the reader in one of that conflict's most misunderstood campaigns. Read about the Virginian who managed to squelch the flames but, terror-stricken, reconsidered and burned his own farm to the ground; the feisty matrons and Masonic effects that protected some buildings from harm; the select Union soldiers who, though convinced that the decimation was militarily necessary, were saddened by the inhumanity of it all. John Heatwole leaves the telling of this saga to the invading and the invaded, and the result is a poignant, riveting, and important contribution to the Civil War literature.

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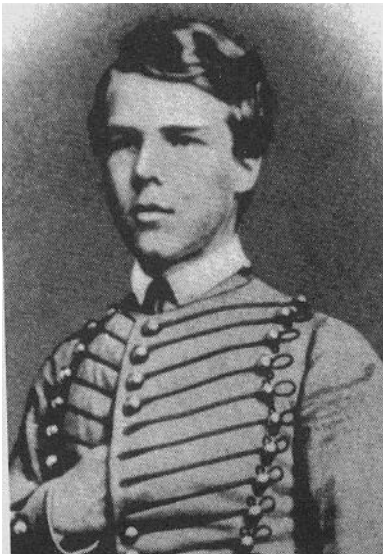
- Mt. Crawford to Harrisonburg: 6 miles
- Harrisonburg to Mole Hill: 4 miles
- Mole Hill to Bridgewater: 4 miles
- Bridgewater to Mt. Crawford: 3 miles
- Bridgewater to Harrisonburg: 7 miles

Chapter Ten

THE BURNT DISTRICT

While following Early's retreating forces, Sheridan had moved farther and farther from immediate and strong support in his rear. He had been plagued by the raids of Southern partisan rangers even before leaving the Lower Valley; the raids seemed more acute now, with every hill, ravine, woodlot, and window being places of concealment from which to fire on small parties of Union soldiers. In addition to the active, recognized bands of partisans, other groups formed to harass Sheridan's supply and communication network. A Richmond newspaper reported that "our guerrillas and irregular bands in the Valley have completely cut Sheridan's communications with Winchester."¹

A few squads of regular Confederate cavalry scouts were sent into the Union lines to gather information about the dispositions of the federal forces so Early could be on firmer ground should he decide to renew the contest with Sheridan at Harrisonburg. On the afternoon of Monday, October 3, a small band of scouts slipped across the North River in drizzling weather and wound its way among the federal camps. Sadly and unintentionally, that action unleashed a firestorm of devastating proportions.



Lt. John Rodgers Meigs in his U.S. Military Academy uniform. (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers)

Lt. John Meigs and two orderlies had been out since daybreak that Monday, making the rounds of the camps to verify the position of each brigade so they could be moved efficiently at Sheridan's command. They ended their circuit near dusk, about a mile north of Dayton. A light rain was falling as they headed back toward headquarters at Harrisonburg. They passed the pickets at the junction of the Warm Springs Turnpike and entered the Swift Run Gap Road, which ran over a set of low hills to the Valley Pike.

There was a belt of woods about a hundred yards from the junction, on the right. Suddenly, about thirty yards ahead of Meigs's party, there emerged three riders wearing oilcloths for protection against the drizzle. The trio turned away from Meigs and continued at a walk, riding three abreast up the hill. Meigs urged his horse into a trot, and the orderlies followed him in single file. As he neared the unknown men, he called for them to halt. They slipped into single file but kept moving at a relaxed pace.

The men Meigs had surprised were Confederate scouts from Wickham's brigade sent to gather information about the disposition of Union troops between Dayton and the Valley Pike. Benjamin Franklin ("Frank") Shaver of the First Virginia Cavalry, whose home was close by, was guiding troopers George Martin and F. M. Campbell of the Fourth Virginia Cavalry on the mission. Campbell, who was General Wick-

¹ (Richmond *Examiner*, October 7, 1864)

ham's chief scout, was actually in command. Shaver had been included in the detail because it was thought he knew "every cow path" in the area. He had remarked when assigned to the task that he "would like to go home and see the folks and get a good square meal."²

When the Southerners had crossed the North River earlier in the day, they had been five in number. Near the river they captured two federal pickets; one of the Confederates suggested they shoot the prisoners. Shaver strongly objected, saying, "If you want to kill them, give them their arms, and two of you fight it out with them. I will kill the first man who attempts to kill them." Campbell then ordered two of the scouts to take the prisoners back into Confederate lines while he, Shaver, and Martin continued.³



Just to the left of the two trees is the spot along the Swift Run Gap Road where Lieutenant Meigs was killed. (Author's photo)

In an attempt to miss the Warm Springs Turnpike picket post, they had turned eastward, hoping the dreary weather and the approach of night would allow them to reach Shaver's father's home undetected. When the scouts realized that federal horsemen were approaching from behind, Campbell asked Shaver, "Shall we run or fight?" To which Shaver replied, "Fight!" Campbell ordered them to widen the gaps between their mounts to enable them to wheel around at the moment of confrontation. In preparation, each had drawn his revolver under his oilcloth cape. Perhaps these movements, in addition to the manner in which they had entered the road, had alerted Meigs to draw his own weapon. As Meigs drew up beside Martin, the Confederate showed his revolver and demanded the lieutenant's surrender. Meigs discharged his weapon from its place of concealment and shot the man through the groin; Martin pulled the trigger of his own weapon and slumped forward in the saddle, yet he held on. The shots that followed in quick succession were muffled to flat pops by the damp air. Shaver aimed his revolver at Meigs's head and pulled the trigger. Campbell fired his weapon into the officer's body. Meigs reeled, fell from the

saddle, and lay dead in the roadway. In the confusion, one of his orderlies leaped from his horse, jumped a split rail fence, and disappeared into the enclosing gloom; the other orderly threw up his hands and surrendered.⁴

The wounded Martin pleaded with his companions to get him away from the federal lines. The prisoner was warned to keep his mouth shut and was given Meigs's horse to lead, while

²(Staunton *Yost's Weekly*, Wayland 1973, 187; Interview: Joseph H. Meyerhoeffer)

³ (Staunton *Yost's Weekly*)

⁴ (Ibid.) Frank Shaver died in 1895. His personal account of the Meigs affair was found among his papers. He always maintained that the confrontation could not have been avoided. Friends of his reported, "That Lieutenant Meigs had fallen by his hand was a grief to Shaver." It was found that the hammer of Martin's revolver had fallen on a defective percussion cap.

his horse was led by one of the scouts. The party galloped back down the road toward the picket post, blew past it at full speed, crossed the turnpike, and rode up the wooded hillside to the west, where it vanished into the trees. The confused pickets did not fire until the scouts were well off into the woods; their shots had no effect but to urge the riders to greater speed.

The scouts and their prisoner rode on into the night for some distance, looping back south and west of Bridgewater to the vicinity of Spring Creek. Near there they left Martin at the home of Robert Wright, and Wright sent to Bridgewater for Dr. T. H. B. Brown, who came to look after the man's wounds.

Shaver and Campbell, with their prisoner, re-crossed North River and made their way back to the camp of the First Virginia Cavalry at the village of Milnesville, about four miles south of Bridgewater. From there Campbell rode on to his own regiment's camp on the Valley Pike near Burke's Mill; his Fourth Virginia was part of Thomas Rosser's Cavalry Division, which had arrived from eastern Virginia the day before.⁵

With Rosser was the Laurel Brigade, whose greatest strength was that most of its men were native to western Virginia. They had seen much hard service recently, yet their spirits were buoyed— they were going home. They felt they could not be beaten on their own turf, the difference in numbers notwithstanding.

At the news of Meigs's death Sheridan flew into a rage; he had been constantly irritated by guerrillas and bushwhackers since coming to the Valley in August, but now they had killed one of his favorite and most promising young officers. The orderly who escaped reported that the trio had been fired on by civilians and that the lieutenant had been shot down in cold blood while trying to surrender. It is likely that, because of the turmoil, and in his haste to save himself, he had heard Martin's demand for surrender and nothing else. He also reported that he had thought the men ahead of them had been their own because they were wearing "rubber overcoats."

Sheridan considered Meigs's death to be murder, not an act of war. Even after it became known that the men on the road were Confederate cavalymen on a scouting mission, the story persisted that Meigs had been ambushed and killed in cold blood. The question that should have been raised, but was not, is this: why would three Confederates, surrounded by thousands of Federals, want to draw attention to themselves by ambushing Meigs?⁶

The following morning one of Sheridan's aides, Maj. George A. Forsyth, was sent to find the scene of the encounter. A sergeant of the provost guard on the road reported that he had just come upon the body of a lieutenant a few hundred yards ahead and pointed Forsyth to the spot. Meigs was fully stretched out, with one arm partially raised. His other arm was extended at his side, and just beyond the hand was his revolver. Upon examination it was found that one round had been fired. There was a wound just under his right eye and another in the left side of his chest. Forsyth speculated that Meigs had been "murdered by mem-

⁵ (Driver 1991, 101)

⁶ (Rockingham *Register*, August 16, 1895)

bers of either Mosby's or White's [Thirty-fifth Battalion Virginia Cavalry] gang" when he made his report that evening. In closing he lamented, "I have never been so pained in my life as I have at the death of little Meigs."⁷

Sheridan did not wait to see if more information would be forthcoming. His frame of mind toward bushwhackers in general and this incident in particular is reflected in one of his reports: "Lieutenant John R. Meigs, my engineer officer, was murdered beyond Harrisonburg, near Dayton. . . . Since I came into the Valley from Harper's Ferry, every train, every small party, and every straggler, has been bushwhacked by the people."

Chaplain Edwin M. Haynes of the Tenth Vermont Infantry was incensed over the Meigs killing and wrote:

This, every living soldier who was in this campaign knows to be true. The people were meek-faced citizens by day, and in the presence of any considerable body of Union troops; but as soon as the troops were out of sight, when darkness came on, they became desperate and bloodthirsty guerrillas; and in this character they stole upon our men like savages, and shot them down or dragged them away to the woods where some of them were found hung up by their heels with their throats cut. . . . Concealed in their houses, or in the guise of friends, they made bloody capital of our conversation, counted our files for the Confederate Chief, and pounced upon the weary soldier who, lame and panting, had fallen a few rods behind the column, to drag him away a prisoner, or butcher him on the spot. Could anything justify their course? Could any punishment be too severe?⁸

In direct reprisal for this act of "murder," Sheridan ordered that the town of Dayton and surrounding houses be burned to the ground. Meigs had not been dead more than a few hours when Custer was summoned to headquarters and in person received orders to begin burning homes and barns in the condemned area. The legend is that as Custer and Sheridan took leave of one another in the yard of the Byrd house, the young brigadier sprang to his horse and called back over his shoulder, "Look out for smoke!"

Chaplain Louis Boudrye of the Fifth New York Cavalry of Custer's division wrote that Captain Lee, the provost marshal of the division, issued orders to the regiment to "burn every building within a circle of three miles from the scene of the murder."⁹

While the cavalymen of Custer's Fifth New York made ready to go to work in the area around Dayton, the men of the 116th Ohio Infantry learned to their dismay that it would be their job to bum the town. They had come to know and like many of the inhabitants during their short stay. In the early hours of the morning of October 4 they went from house to

⁷ (NA, Forsyth Letter) For years Col. James Forsyth, Sheridan's chief of staff, has incorrectly been identified as the officer who found Meigs.

⁸ (HRCHS, Civil War Files) There is a tradition that along the Back Road near Brock's Gap six or seven burners from Custer's division were captured and hanged

⁹ (LCMD, Rodgers Family Papers, Series 1; Boudrye 1865, 176)

house, waking the families and informing them that the town was to be destroyed that evening.

The older folks and small children were bundled up in blankets against the cool and damp fall air as the more able-bodied residents began to remove as many possessions as they could from their condemned homes. Some of the people later related unexpected acts of kindness— some of the Northerners helped them to move their belongings to safer ground.¹⁰ Lizzie Coffman remembered that a Union guard was posted to discourage "foragers" from helping themselves to items from the pile in front of her home.¹¹

Sarah Shrum, whose husband Samuel was away with the local reserves, had a parlor window open when a soldier rode right up to the house. His horse's head was inside the room as he informed her that she had to leave. She could feel the horse's breath on her arm. She and her seven-year-old son Joe began to move their belongings with the help of a Union soldier.¹²

One Ohio soldier later recalled "such mourning, such lamentations, such crying and pleading for mercy. I never saw nor never want to see again, some were wild, crazy, mad, some Cry [ing] for help while others would throw their arms around yankee soldiers necks and implore mercy."¹³

One Union cavalryman in Custer's division described the scene in a letter to his wife: "In the town of Dayton everything was carried out of the houses and left out till morning.. .. [T]he soldiers carried off whatever they had a mind to but I did not touch a single thing." He also noted that the "people here had made large supplys of apple butter but the Yankees used it up."¹⁴ Lizzie Coffman reported that the bands of cavalymen wandering around were the main culprits when it came to thievery.¹⁵

The targeted area reached south to Bridgewater, east to the Valley Pike, and north to Harrisonburg and the Rawley Springs Turnpike. The Dry River, which runs eastward from the mountains for a number of miles before turning southward near the village of Rushville, marked the rough boundary on the west side of the proscribed area.

The townsfolk saw homes beyond the town's environs engulfed in flame as the Fifth New York Cavalry began to carry out its assignment. One of the first places targeted was the farm of Noah and Sarah Wenger, just fifty yards from the spot where Meigs had been killed. Whether or not the Wengers accepted Sheridan's offer of transportation is not known, but Wenger loaded personal items on a wagon while his wife baked bread for their journey and tried to keep five-year-old Peter close to her. Their preparations were hindered, however, as the soldiers appropriated her baked goods as soon as they came out of the oven. The Wengers complained to an officer, who put a guard on the house. Without the harassment, it

¹⁰.(Sites and Hess 1962, 65; Interview: Joseph H. Meyerhoeffer)

¹¹.(Leigh Private Collection, Coffman Letter)

¹².(Sites and Hess 1962, 65; Interview: Joseph H. Meyerhoeffer)

¹³.(Grimsley 1995, 184)

¹⁴ (USAMHI, Martin Papers)

¹⁵ (Leigh Private Collection, Coffman Letter)

did not take them long to finish packing. They pulled out into the road where Meigs had been shot less than twenty-four hours before and drove over to the Valley Pike, where they joined a refugee train made up of some four hundred wagons.

Soon after their departure, a group of cavalymen arrived to burn the place. Andy Thompson, the fourteen-year-old boy who worked part-time for the Wengers, watched as the soldiers piled hay against the barn, broke up some weatherboarding for kindling, and set it ablaze. After seeing it well-caught, they rode on to another farm. Before too long a second squad of federal horsemen arrived. They entered the house, emptied the chaff from bed ticks against a wooden partition and kindled it, then withdrew to the yard as smoke began to roll from the top of the doorway. Andy, under their gaze, grabbed a crock that was upended on a fence paling and filled it with water. He threw the water on the fire, then stamped out the lingering embers with his feet. For some reason the men did not restart the fire or punish Andy for his interference in their work. When the Wengers returned during the next year, their house still stood because of the courage and loyalty of their hired boy.¹⁶

Across the field and the Swift Run Gap Road from the Wenger farm Waverly, the old brick residence of the late Judge Daniel Smith, did not fare as well. Flames roared from its windows and ate away at its beautiful mahogany double-front doors.

Detachments of the Fifth New York Cavalry worked their way out from the storm center. A person standing on the roof of the house on the highest eminence in Dayton would have seen smoke rising from burning homes in every direction.



Susan Swope, who answered a Union soldier's question with one of her own. (Swope Family)

One group of tough, blue-clad horsemen descended on Reuben Swope's farm, which was on a side road about a half a mile north of town. Swope begged them to stop, but to no avail. His wife, Susanna, and their three grown daughters looked on in disbelief as the Northerners set all of the outbuildings on fire. The girls were, however, given permission to enter the house and retrieve family heirlooms they wished to save from the coming conflagration. One of the soldiers asked twenty-year-old Susan Swope, the youngest daughter, if she thought that the women of the Valley would ever forgive the Northern soldiers for burning their homes. A quick light flashed in her eyes as she replied, "Do you think if it were Southern soldiers burning the houses of your mothers and sisters they would be forgiven?"

Once the girls had gathered what they could from the house, the soldiers shooed them out and set fires in each of the downstairs rooms. The soldiers left, but before departing they warned the family that they would return later, and if they found that the fires in the house had been extinguished, they would shoot

¹⁶ (Sites and Hess 1962, 66-67)

them all. Despite the warning, as soon as the burners were out of sight the Swopes immediately filled the hogs' slop buckets with water and, with much exertion, saved their home.

A little later, as he and his family surveyed the loss of all of their other buildings, Swope considered what they had done. Fear for the lives of his wife and children prompted him to set the fires anew, thus becoming an unwilling yet compliant accomplice in the destruction of his own home.¹⁷



Abigail Lincoln Coffman, Abraham Lincoln's first cousin once removed. (Estate of John W. Wayland)

The blue horde visited every farm in the three miles between Dayton and Bridgewater. At Joseph and Abigail Coffman's, all eleven of the slaves ran off, including the trusted Harence and Lee, who "told the devils where our stock was." Even with the treachery of the two slaves, the federal horsemen did not find the hidden horses and cattle, but the soldiers did kill all of their hogs and burn the barn, new smokehouse, and granary besides destroying most of the fencing on the place. The house was spared, although the details of the event have been confused by time and telling.

The most often-told story is that sixty-four-year-old Abigail Coffman stood on her porch and called to the soldiers that they dared not burn her house because she was a first cousin of Abraham Lincoln's. In reality she was Lincoln's first cousin once removed; her father and Lincoln's grandfather were brothers.

Another story holds that Mrs. Coffman's devoted slave woman went to Union headquarters and told the officers that her mistress was a near relation of the U.S. president and that she personally had been treated kindly during her servitude with the family. This story is brought into question by another that maintains the house was spared because it was used as Custer's headquarters; instead of going to headquarters, the slave woman would have been there already.

Yet another story is that a Union officer found Joseph Coffman's Masonic apron when he entered the house to burn it, and that that brought about a reprieve. Whatever the truth, the house was left standing while most of those around it were reduced to ashes.¹⁸

Illness in a home in some cases brought mercy and in other cases did not. It all depended on the temperament of the man in charge of the particular detachment. Just to the east of Dayton a house was spared because the owner's old aunt was bedfast. Just to the north of town, at the Abraham Paul home, a similar situation spared the house, but the barn was torched.

¹⁷ (Swope Family History Committee 1977, 32; Interview: James O. Swope)

¹⁸ (Wayland 1973, 196; Interview: Joseph H. Meyerhoeffer)

A little farther down Cook's Creek from the Coffmans' was Retirement, the home of John Alexander Herring *ST.*, whose son was a sergeant in McClanahan's battery in Imboden's brigade. The Herring family was one of the oldest in the region; the farm was extensive and the house, built in 1776, was a fine one. The story goes that the elderly Herring was ill, and that the soldiers carried him from the house and dumped him in the yard. From his position on the ground, with his wife standing over him, he watched as household goods tossed from the windows smashed on the earth below. Following this needless destruction, the house was set on fire, along with the barn and other outbuildings.

Across the creek from Retirement, a tenant house on the Herring property was occupied by the Valentine Bolton family. Bolton, age forty-five, was either away with the county reserves or off hiding livestock for his landlord. When the burning detail arrived, Mary Bolton, her three young children, mother-in-law, and sister-in-law were told to vacate the premises as the house was about to be destroyed. Some of the soldiers slipped inside to plunder the family's belongings before applying the torch. Others, with more helpful dispositions, carried furniture from the house so that all of the Bolton's property would not be lost in the flames.

As Mrs. Bolton stood comforting her children, a soldier approached holding out a book he had found— a Masonic manual. He asked, "Is your husband a Mason?" She was not pleasantly disposed toward the men who had come to burn the roof from over her head, and snapped back, "Yes, he is!" She must have been somewhat surprised at the magical properties of this answer, for in an instant the other soldiers were told that the house was not to be burned. Property that had been removed was taken back inside, and a guard was left to protect the premises from other details that were crisscrossing the area. Thus the tenant house survived, yet the manor house burned within sight of it.¹⁹

Another estate near those of the Boltons and Herrings belonged to Lewis Byrd, who had enlisted at the first call for troops in 1861 and had served faithfully as a sergeant in the Tenth Virginia Infantry. He had been wounded and captured at Chancellorsville in the spring of 1863, and his left leg was amputated below the knee. As he languished in the federal prison at Elmira, New York, a burning party from that very state destroyed every building on his property. ²⁰The *Rockingham Register and Advertiser* reported, "The enemy burnt Mr. Byrd's barn with all its contents, two dwelling houses, his shop, lumber house."²¹

David Landis, a young Mennonite clergyman, had taken advantage of Sheridan's offer and had been given a six-mule team and wagon to move his family away. The Landises quickly packed what they could, mostly bedding and clothes, and went to Harrisonburg in a falling rain the evening that Meigs died. They stayed out in the open for the next couple of days while waiting for the refugee train to get under way. During the wait Landis became uneasy about his farm. He recalled later, "I went back to see the state of things there, and found the

¹⁹ (Wayland 1973, 194-95; Sites and Hess 1962, 66; Interview: Joseph H. Meyerhoeffer)

²⁰ (Murphy 1989, 143) In this work Murphy has incorrectly recorded Lewis Byrd's name as Levi.

²¹ (*Rockingham Register and Advertiser*, February 10, 1865)

destruction completed. The dwelling house and barn with all their contents and all the outbuildings were entirely consumed by the flames."²²

Another Mennonite who thought it would be folly to stay in the Valley after Sheridan was done with it left this vivid account of his feelings at the time:

The Union army came up the Valley sweeping everything before them like a hurricane; there was nothing left for man or beast from the horse down to the chicken; all was taken. So we felt as though we could not subsist; and besides, they were burning down barns and mills in every direction around us. Not feeling willing to stay and again have the rebel army over us, searching for something to eat, I went to Harrisonburg Head Quarters to see about getting away.²³

Benjamin Wenger, a successful farmer and Mennonite deacon in the area, suffered heavily during this time. He had worked hard to build up his farm so he would have something to give his children when it came time for them to set up housekeeping on their own. To that end he had just built a new home on his property; the old home was to go to his son Abram and his young family. But on that terrible Tuesday one of the Northern cavalry details cantered down his lane, and soon both houses and the barn were engulfed in flames. Three thick towers of smoke pushed against the leaden sky. Horses and cattle were driven off, and forage and produce were loaded onto wagons and taken away.²⁴

Less than a mile east of Bridgewater a squad of Custer's cavalry swooped in on the Byerly farm and merchant mill complex.

In 1833 young Joseph Byerly had been closing up the mill late one night when he looked up into the dark sky and witnessed a long and spectacular meteor shower. Having never seen anything like it, he concluded that the world must be coming to an end. He woke the members of his family, gathered them together, and spent the night reading the Bible and praying in preparation for Judgment Day. With the coming of dawn the Byerlys realized that the Lord had "fooled 'em," and they returned to their normal existence.

Byerly had passed away before the war began, and his widow now ran the farm and managed the milling enterprise. On this day, with the wind rustling through the yellow leaves of the poplars along the river, it seemed to the family that the world really was coming to an end. The soldiers carried out their work quickly, and both of the Byerly barns and most of the outbuildings were already fully ablaze before the widow Byerly was fully aware of what was happening out on her property. When the burners turned their attention to the house and mill, Mrs. Byerly pleaded that these two structures at least should be spared. After question-

²² (Horst 1967, 105-6)

²³ (Ibid., 105)

²⁴ (VSL, WPA Inventories, Rockingham and Scott Counties) Even after all of this, the Wengers did not lose their faith. At the end of the hostilities they built anew, with Benjamin living to see his family prosper once again. Abram was ordained in the ministry of their church.

ing her, they learned that she was a widow, and the cavalrymen, per orders, remounted and rode on without inflicting further damage.²⁵

Over on the west side of the Valley Pike, near the Pike Mennonite Church, the farmers had been warned the day before to pack up and clear out as their homes and farm buildings were to be destroyed. Michael Shank, whose farm was some two hundred yards north of the church, decided to leave with the other refugees who were gathering at Harrisonburg. He and his wife, Lydia, had packed their possessions in the wagons, and his five children stood crying in the rain as he hitched up the teams.

His wife rode with the youngest child in the wagon while Shank led the team on foot. The other four children, including nine-year-old Kate, also walked. Kate weighed all of thirty-six pounds that day. At birth she had weighed only a pound and a half and was so small she could be placed in a quart cup and covered with a hand. Her own hand was so small that its palm could be hidden by a kernel of corn. As little as she was, she came from stock that had weathered adversity over the centuries; she walked all the way to Pennsylvania and later told the story of those difficult and confusing times to her fifteen children.²⁶

The Shanks moved along the congested pike toward Harrisonburg and were hardly out of sight of their home when a burning detail arrived and set about reducing their once thriving and prosperous farm to a scorched mark on the earth."

As the burning continued in the outlying area around Dayton, the townsfolk awaited their fate.

²⁵ (Ibid.)

²⁶ (Interview: Emma Shank Delp; Delp 1990, 3-6)

Chapter Eighteen

SHERIDAN ON THE VALLEY PIKE HARRISONBURG TO NEW MARKET

The Valley Pike, the main thoroughfare in the Shenandoah Valley, was one of the first macadamized roads in the United States. Prior to the war it carried produce, butter, hides, iron, hemp, feathers, and beeswax in Conestoga freight wagons, also known as Baltimore or Knoxville teams, bound for the large Baltimore merchant houses. The wagons returned loaded with merchandise that stocked the shelves of Valley stores. Now the cheerful sound of harness bells was a faded memory; the only wagons that passed by were in one way or another tied to the exigencies of war.

By 1864 the pike was not in very good condition, as repairs had been put off for a number of years. Yet even in its worn condition, it was still the best highway in this part of the commonwealth. With Custer burning along the Back Road and Merritt on the Middle Road, Sheridan himself took the Valley Pike. There are many stories of Sheridan popping up at farms in all corners of the Valley, but the fact is that he accompanied the infantry down the pike so he could be easily located to receive reports and be available to direct his troops should the Confederates force a major confrontation. Most accounts of his attitude as he traveled amid the destruction indicate that he viewed it as a necessary military expediency, and that, aside from the refugees, he was not overly concerned about the welfare of the people whose homes and farms were put to the torch.



*Maj. Gen. Lunsford L. Lomax
(Library of Congress)*

Crook's Army of West Virginia was moving down both sides of the pike by 5:30 A.M. on the morning of October 6, followed closely by the VI and the XIX Corps, which also took to the fields as the Union army left its camps around Harrisonburg. The artillery and supply wagons rumbled down the bed of the pike.

A member of the VI Corps later recalled that "hundreds of refugees accompanied us from Staunton, Mount Crawford and Harrisonburg. Unionists who had endured persecution until it was no longer endurable, and who now left houses and farms to find relief in the north from their sufferings for loyalty; and negroes who sought freedom from their ancient bondage."²⁷

The last federal infantry unit to abandon its camp was the Third Brigade, Second Division of the XIX Corps, commanded by Col. Daniel Macauley. Its men were predominantly New Yorkers, with one regiment from Massachusetts. Among various duties, they were to act as support

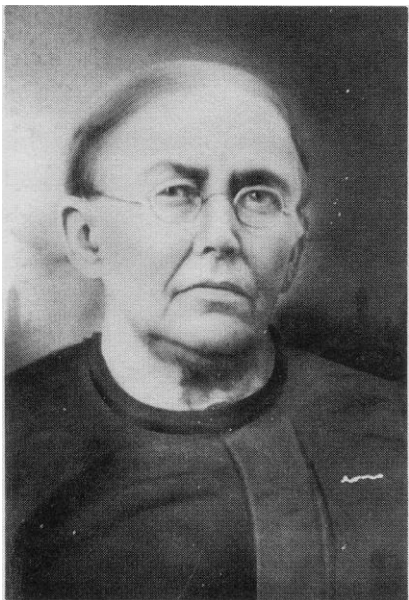
for some artillery pieces that would be kept with the rear guard in case of trouble.

²⁷ (Stevens 1866, 411)

Sheridan felt that he was initiating the movement from a position of strength and as an integral part of his campaign strategy, and he felt that his front was where his troops were closest to the enemy. He wanted his infantry and artillery to have a good start before his caval-rymen formed their line from the Massanutten to Shenandoah Mountain. What would have been considered a withdrawal in any other context was an 'advance in reverse' to Sheridan's way of thinking. This explains the statement of one of the Third Brigade soldiers, who said that the cavalry was "acting as our skirmishers."²⁸ Colonel Kidd, commanding Merritt's First Brigade, was charged with keeping the pursuing Confederates at bay. He had the tedious job of directing the "skirmish line" to deal with feints from General Lomax's division of Con-federate cavalry.²⁹

The infantrymen who formed in shivering ranks along the cold road were expecting to start the long march to Strasburg and anxious to be on their way. Instead they were surprised to learn that they had been assigned to burning parties and stock gathering and driving units. Until this point, the actual burning had been conducted by the cavalry.

One of the first farms visited by the infantry belonged to Jacob and Margaret Byeriy, whose extensive holdings bordered the pike to the east. For two days they had watched homes burning across the wide fields and the pike, and they fully expected to be included in the de-struction. Michael Shank's house, near the Pike Mennonite Church, had gone up in flames the evening before. On this morning, the 6th, the Byerlys saw the barns and outbuildings of neighbors toward Mount Crawford sending black plumes of smoke heavenward as rain-dampened siding caught fire. As the drier framing timbers ignited, the color of the smoke changed to a dirty gray.



Martha Jane Byerly in old age.
(John F. Byerly, Jr)

The Byerly's eldest daughter, seventeen-year-old Martha Jane, took joy in her music but had played her concertina very little over the past couple of months. She, like so many who had believed Southern independence to be a real possibility, had come to realize that the end of the war was in sight and that it was not going to be what had been hoped for or imagined. And it was no longer a war of principle fought in far fields— this very morning it stalked up the lane in the guise of blue-clad infantrymen. Martha Jane clutched the concertina to her breast; it was her most prized possession, and she was not about to let it go without a fight. Other valuables had already been hidden away; a slave, Nanny, had even contrived to se-cure a five-pound sack of sugar under her skirts.

The officer in charge sent men to round up the livestock while the burning squads made their preparations. Be-sides the smaller outbuildings on the flats along the creek,

²⁸ (Hanaburgh 1894, 159; Deforest 1946, 197)

²⁹ (Kidd 1969, 399-400)

two fine, large barns faced each other across the yard. The officer himself entered the Byerly home with a few of his men to announce his intent to destroy it. The family was told to get out. Byerly begged for relief, but it seemed as if his entreaties fell on deaf ears. Finally, having resigned himself to the loss, he told the unrelenting officer that he would stay and bear witness from the yard. Whether it was the father's fervent pleas, the sight of the distraught children, or something else that finally touched the officer will never be known, but he unexpectedly rescinded the order— the house was saved.

Martha Jane stood behind the house and watched in horror as the granary, pens, comcribs, smokehouse, and barns were engulfed in flames. The roar of the fire mixed with the cries of frightened animals as some of the soldiers chased stray pigs and sheep while others tried to hold the rest together in a little herd. Despite the chaos, the stunned girl focused on a single animal, a special pet belonging to her younger sisters, Fannie and Lucy— a little duck now waddling back and forth in great agitation. The sight of the frantic duck stirred Martha Jane into action. With tears streaming down her cheeks, she moved toward the men, crying out that the duck was a pet and should not be harmed.

Several of the soldiers, who probably were not much older than Martha Jane herself, laughed and elbowed one another in the ribs. One of them picked up the bird and told her teasingly that if she were to play them a tune, and if they liked it, she just might get the duck back. She wiped the tears from her eyes and slipped her hands through the straps of the concertina. With great deliberation she pulled air into the squeezebox, placed her fingers on the buttons, paused a double beat to summon up her courage, and then began to play with great passion. When the first few notes of the popular Southern anthem "Dixie" rose above the din, the soldiers were astonished. For a few long moments they seemed to be as stunned as Martha Jane had been. Finally the soldier holding the duck laughed good-naturedly and offered it to the plucky musician. She stopped playing immediately, pulled the quacking duck into the crook of her arm, and ran with it to the house.

When the Northerners departed, all was quiet but for the crackling of the fires and the muffled roar of a racing wind born of the flames.³⁰

As Macauley's soldiers moved north of Harrisonburg, they came upon a small subsistence farm owned by Jacob Baugh, a fifty-two-year-old tailor. He and his wife, Catherine, and eldest daughter, Dorothy, had emigrated to America and the Shenandoah Valley from Germany twenty-one years earlier. Six more children were born in the Valley— four daughters and, finally, two sons. Two of the eldest girls hired out as house servants to local farmers to help their parents with their finances. By the time the soldiers arrived, the Baughs could see smoke and flames in every direction. They knew that if they were to stay they would face starvation, so they heeded the soldiers' suggestion that they leave and accepted their offer of a wagon. The wagon was quickly loaded, mainly with clothing and bedding. When this was done the four oldest girls— Dorothy, Martha, Nancy, and Hannah— announced that they would not go with the others but instead would stay and look after the place. After some tears and the realization that the girls were in earnest, their father drove the wagon with the rest of the family on down the road.

³⁰(Byerly 1994, 75-76; Interview: John F. Byerly Jr.)

With part of the family gone, the soldiers told the girls that they had better leave also, as the house was to be burned. As the men moved from room to room kindling the little blazes, the girls rushed to gather up what remaining possessions they could and carry them out into the yard. Some of the soldiers were moved by the sight and helped to save what they could, which turned out to be a considerable amount. When the soldiers had departed, one of the sisters walked to a neighbor's farm and borrowed a wheelbarrow. The girls made many trips back and forth to Reuben Armentrout's place, where they stored their household items. They then went to live with relatives and friends until the war ended and the family could be reunited.³¹

Beyond the Baugh place the troops passed Harrison's Cave, where John C. Fremont had camped his army during the Valley Campaign in 1862. In the road and on either side of it, squads of soldiers drove herds of confiscated livestock. One of the herds was too large to manage, and a couple of miles beyond the cave the decision was made to reduce the burden. A large number of animals were driven to the top of a broad hill, where the soldiers shot them down with their rifles. The corpses were dragged into a pile, and squads of infantrymen stacked dry tinder from a nearby woods on top of them. The brush was soaked with lamp oil and turpentine from neighboring farms, and when the pyre was lighted, the flames shot up with a loud whoosh. The heat was so intense that at one point small streams of grease flowed down the hillside.³²

Farther down the road and east of Lacey Spring was the farm of Harriet Koontz, whose cousin was the notorious guerrilla Al Lincoln. Despite his promises of protection, her concerns heightened as she watched the columns of smoke approaching. She sent her children over to the lower slopes of the Massanutten with some of the livestock and instructions to stay there until she sent for them. Soon after, the Federals swept over the hill from the pike and entered her yard. They wanted to know if there were any guerrillas nearby, where her valuables were hidden, and where the livestock had been taken.

She was so frightened that she could not find her voice, and some of the men told her that she had better start coming up with some answers. They seemed to her to be very "mean," but they did not harm her and eventually just ignored her as they set the farm buildings on fire. Had she found her voice and told them she was a widow, events might have transpired differently.

As it was, all of the structures were torched but for the house and the granary, which was empty except for a large kettle. One of the soldiers had looked in, announced, "Nothing in here," and passed it by. Had he known that the kettle was used for cooking down nitre from

³¹ (Robertson 1971, 241-42; 1850 and 1860 Census for Rockingham County) Pvt. John O. Casler penned one of the liveliest memoirs to emerge from the American Civil War. Following the war he married Martha Baugh.

³² (Interview: Thomas M. Harrison) Mr. Harrison owned Melrose Cavern, first known as Harrison Cave. The cave is very close to the Valley Pike, and its walls are filled with soldiers' inscriptions, most created by John C. Fremont's army in 1862.

collected urine and 'night dirt,' he most likely would not have ignored it— nitre was an important ingredient in the manufacture of gunpowder.

The real horror of the situation struck the widow only after the soldiers had departed, when she heard the screams of the family dog, trapped in the barn and burning to death.³³

Morgan Sellers, his wife, Julia, and their children had lived in the Staunton area before the war but had moved down the Valley Pike near Lacey Spring soon after Virginia seceded from the Union. Sellers joined the Seventh Virginia Cavalry, where he served in the same company with Al Lincoln. He was wounded in April 1864 and sent home to recuperate, but he did not return to his unit. He joined Lincoln's irregulars when the captain deserted in June.

When Colonel Macauley's troops approached Lacey Spring shortly after noon, Sellers was in the Massanutten with Lincoln's gang. His wife, at home nursing two children ill with typhoid fever, was worried for their safety. She had heard of the burning of houses around Dayton and did not know if that mode of warfare was continuing. She wanted the children out of the house. She roused them and dragged their beds out into the yard, helped them to get back in, and made them as comfortable as possible under the trees.

When the soldiers arrived they went right to the barn and outbuildings and set them ablaze, ignoring the children. According to local legend, Mrs. Sellers saw General Sheridan out in the road and pleaded with him to spare the house for the sake of her two very sick children, who needed a roof over their heads. He assured her that the house would not be touched, "however, he took all the chickens and everything that was loose."³⁴

Near the Sellers's place was Jesse Carrier's farm. Carrier was very outspoken in his condemnation of the war, but his bitter feelings were directed more toward the Confederates than toward the forces of the United States. He felt that killing was wrong and that the Confederates were responsible for the bloodshed and sorrow that touched so many families. In 1862, when Gen. Nathaniel Banks's army had come up the pike chasing Jackson, seventeen-year-old Amanda Carder had asked a federal band to play some of the "national airs"; she was "surfeited with Dixie." Carrier was a tanner by trade, and his wife, Leonah, noted that when Confederates bought leather from him he used the money to purchase tobacco, which he then presented to Union soldiers when he saw them. The Carriers left with the refugee train on October 5; on the 6th their home was ransacked and looted by soldiers who had no knowledge of Jesse Carrier's sentiments or generosity to their compatriots.³⁵

Only a few miles farther on was the hamlet known as Sparta; its longer, more optimistic name, Spartopolis, never caught on. Many years earlier the settlement had been known simply as Hoy's Tavern in honor of a local purveyor of hospitality. In 1864 the community consisted of a few shops and the old stagecoach inn owned by Joseph Mauzy and his family. Mauzy had for years been lauded for the welcome he offered to travelers and customers. He

³³ .(Interview: Mane Arlington; Arlington 1982, 294)

³⁴ (Arlington 1982, 295)

³⁵(NA, Southern Claims Commission Files)

was a man of affairs in the county and accorded the respect due a leading citizen. Unfortunately his reputation was of no consequence to the soldiers who swarmed down the pike toward the hopeful little wayside. Two of Mauzy's barns were already afire and the third and largest was at torch-point when the old man ran toward them waving a safeguard that had been given to him by General Banks in 1862. The paper was honored and one barn spared, but the other two were lost. That evening Mauzy lost additional property that he thought had been safely secured. Some of the last of Sheridan's men to pass by heard the quacking of a flock of prized ducks in a makeshift pen beneath the inn's porch. They took the birds to their camp, where they and their comrades enjoyed a hearty duck soup.³⁶

As the infantrymen marched on toward the Shenandoah County line, they also trampled kitchen gardens, cut telegraph wires, and chopped down telegraph poles.³⁷ At first glance the destruction of a small garden plot might seem to be a minor insult when added to the horrors the farm families had already been subjected to, but it was part of a calculated plan to induce Valley soldiers to desert the Confederate cause in order to look after their kinfolk. Melchior Brenneman, a Rockingham County soldier in the Twelfth Virginia Cavalry, is an example of the success of this ploy, a case in point among many. During the Burning he deserted the Laurel Brigade. He and a few friends outfitted a wagon and, under cover of night, escaped with their family members over the mountains into West Virginia.³⁸

Over toward Keezletown, near the pike, General Lomax's Confederate cavalry was not having any real impact on Colonel Kidd's Michigan brigade, but the Southerners did capture about twenty of the burners. They must have been captured between farms and not in the act of destruction, as they were sent off as prisoners instead of being shot on the spot. In the ten regiments and four battalions of Lomax's division, which were spread from the Middle Road to the Blue Ridge Mountains, there were only six or seven companies that had any appreciable number of Valley men as part of their musters; most of the local men were with Imboden, stalking Colonel Powell's contingent in Page County.³⁹

The Confederate infantrymen following the "smoky trail of desolation" were frustrated and anxious to come to grips with their Union counterparts. As they moved through the wasted countryside they were shocked at what they beheld. Henry Kyd Douglas of Early's staff reported "columns of smoke which almost shut out the sun by day .. I saw mothers and maidens tearing their hair and shrieking to Heaven in their fright and despair; and little children, voiceless and tearless in their pitiable terror." He also took notice of the daughter of a clergyman who was seen laughing wildly, having gone mad at the sight of her family's outbuildings in flames.⁴⁰

³⁶ (Hess 1976, 158) The old stagecoach inn remains a landmark at Sparta, present-day Mauzy. It saw Stonewall Jackson's men pass by in 1862 and cadets from V. M. I. march through on their way to immortality at New Market in May 1864, and it witnessed the stem hand of total war in the autumn of 1864.

³⁷.(Alexander Private Collection, Arehart Diary)

³⁸.(Gerberich 1938, 501; Frye 1988, 112)

³⁹.(Lewis 1988,62)

⁴⁰ (Douglas 1968, 315-16; Kleese 1996,12; Delauter 1985, 2)

Before passing out of Rockingham County the burners wreaked their havoc in an area of broad wheat fields and superb grazing land surrounding the hamlet of Tenth Legion. Less than a mile north of the hamlet, between the pike and Smith's Creek to the east, was the farm of seventy-year-old Michael Roller, his equally aged wife, and an unmarried daughter. Like so many others, Roller was powerless to stop the fiery business. There was nothing he could do, he later recalled, "but to stand and look on." As he watched his barn being reduced to charred rubble, a soldier taunted him with a cruel question: "Old man, isn't that a pretty fire?" "Yes," Roller replied, "but when you die and go to Hell, you will see a prettier one than that."

Another mile down the pike the troops came to the farm of Roller's son Samuel. Here they were treated to a humorous sight. Bet Roller, age eighteen, had taken to heart the terrible stories she had heard about uncontrolled looting by the Yankees. "When I heard of the coming of the Union Soldiers and beheld the others taking steps trying to protect their property, I thought of my own little belongings and especially my wardrobe; and thinking certainly they would not take my clothes off me, I went and gathered them up and put them all on; underclothes, petticoats and dresses, and such a fat looking girl as I was the soldiers observed and had much sport because of the odd looking spectacle." Some family members said that besides fearing that articles other clothing would be stolen she also, and more importantly, had a fear of being molested by the Northerners; whatever her motivation, "the soldiers laughed at her standing in all her clothes."

Samuel Roller's sons had taken almost all of the stock to safety in a hidden hollow up on Massanutten Mountain. The barn was empty of fodder and grain and, in keeping with orders, it was left alone. An old corncrib nearby was in such bad shape that it leaned over at a thirty degree angle, and it, too, was spared. After the soldiers had gone, a sow with a litter of new piglets crawled out from under the corncrib.⁴¹

Just to the east of Samuel Roller's, nestled against the slope of the Massanutten, was Rosendale, the home of George Washington Rosenberger and his wife, Barbara Ann. Rosenberger had opposed secession from the beginning, and he abhorred slavery. He had inherited a five-hundred-acre plantation and two slaves from his father in 1858, but he had freed the black men and told them they were at liberty to go where they pleased or to stay and work for wages; they both elected to remain. Rosenberger was not interested in the war, yet he realized he would have to make some kind of arrangements if he expected to be left alone. To this end he was more than willing to pay the one thousand dollars in gold required to have a substitute take his place in the Confederate army.

Despite the fact that Rosendale's owner had never borne arms against the United States, had opposed secession, and had freed his slaves, the Union soldiers piled all of his farm equipment in the barn and set it ablaze.⁴²

⁴¹ (Roller Private Collection, Roller Memoirs; Interviews: Robert Roller, Richard Roller, Minnie Wagenschein, Rachel White, and Paul Roller)

⁴² (VSL, WPA Historical Inventory for Rockingham County)

Back on the pike, not a mile from the county line, Jacob Williamson fared better than George Rosenberger. The Williamson farm was east of the pike, where the rocky fields gave it its name: Hardscrabble. Williamson had sold the farm to his nephew and adopted son, Jacob Williamson Jr., before the war, but he continued to reside on the place. The younger Williamson was absent serving the Confederacy as a major in the Quartermaster Department at this time.

Earlier in the war Union general James Shields had occupied the house for a time, and he and the senior Williamson had had many discussions about the causes of the rift in the states. It was said that each man pressed his case with great fervor yet also with "courtesy and restraint." A mutual respect grew between them, and before Shields moved on he gave the family a signed order of protection. When Sheridan's men came to Hardscrabble, the order saved it.⁴³

When all of the Union troops had departed from Rockingham County, the officers of the county court appointed a committee to assess the destruction inflicted on the farms and businesses lying within the jurisdiction. The committee's final list, which was published in the *Rockingham Register and Advertiser* on November 11, 1864, did not include outbuildings other than barns or personal items looted from homes:

Dwelling houses burned: 30	Cattle carried off: 1,750
Barns burned: 450	Horses carried off: 1,750
Mills burned: 31	Sheep carried off: 4,200
Fencing destroyed in miles: 100	Hogs carried off: 3,350
Bushels of wheat destroyed: 100,000	Factories burned: 3
Bushels of corn destroyed: 50,000	Furnace burned: 1
Tons of hay destroyed: 6,232	

Also not included in the list were diverse types of farm equipment, from hoes to McCormick reapers and threshing machines. Money, silverware, and plate were also not reported, perhaps because the people were ashamed to admit that they had been hoarding against defeat at a time when the Confederacy desperately needed hard currency.⁴⁴

A newspaper correspondent traveling with Sheridan reported what he saw on October 6 as the infantry moved along the Valley Pike:

The poor, alike with the rich, have suffered. Some have lost their all. The wailing of women and children, mingling with the crackling of flames, has sounded from scores of dwellings. I have seen mothers weeping over the loss of that which was necessary to their children's lives, setting aside their own; their last cow, their last bit of flour pilfered by stragglers, the last morsel that they had in the world to eat or drink. Young girls with flushed cheeks, or pale with tearful or tearless eyes, have pleaded with or cursed the men whom the necessities of war have forced to burn the build-

⁴³ (Ibid.)

⁴⁴ (Surber 1921, 33)

ings reared by their fathers, and turn them into paupers in a day. The completeness of the desolation is awful.⁴⁵

Another correspondent observed, "The horses and all the able-bodied Negroes and field hands are being collected and sent to the rear."⁴⁶

Yet another Northern correspondent noted:

The amount of wheat we find in the Valley is astonishingly large. The mills are full of it. The barns are stored with it. Stacks as high as houses are found in the fields. . . . Almost every bam we come to is loaded with wheat, hay and oats. The destruction of these barns is being accomplished as fast as possible.⁴⁷

Even the lives on the farms that were not in the direct line of one of the Northern units were affected as fear disrupted the daily routines by which people made a living. Men going into the mountains with their livestock could not work their fields. One farmer who lived near the base of Massanutten Peak wrote in his daybook that he had lost thirteen days of work since September 26 because of "the Yankees."⁴⁸

Some of the Union soldiers were only interested in getting back to a base; which they would be well supplied with certain necessities. One soldier reported "The push up the valley and constant fighting had made our men look quit shabby, some being almost barefoot." Later this man's company was issued sixty pairs of shoes, "not half enough to supply the demand."⁴⁹The Confederate however, were faring much worse. At the battle of Cedar Creek, still almost two weeks away, it would be noted that many of the Union dead were "stripped of their clothing by the enemy."⁵⁰

With the coming of darkness on October 6, Sheridan's forces along the pike went into camps; they were stretched out for six miles, from near the Shenandoah County line almost to Mount Jackson. Although they had not covered much ground as the cavalry on the Back and Middle roads, considering the multiple burdens of livestock, supply wagons, and refugees they had had to contend with, they had done pretty well.

General Sheridan rode on to below New Market, where he stopped for the night.

⁴⁵.(Tomes undated, 492)

⁴⁶.(Richmond *Examiner*, October 14, 1864)

⁴⁷.(Ibid., October 13, 1864)

⁴⁸.(Garber Private Collection, Sheets Farm Book)

⁴⁹.(Hanaburgh 1894, 160)

⁵⁰.(Ibid., 160,169)