

# ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

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## The Fall of Richmond

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On March 9, 1865, General Robert E. Lee sent a dispatch to the new Secretary of War, General John C. Breckinridge. He bluntly informed Breckinridge that the Confederacy was “in peril.” He concluded his missive by telling the Secretary, “It seems impossible to maintain our present position. The army cannot be kept together, and our present lines must be abandoned.”<sup>1</sup> After four years, how had it come to this? Lee himself had confided to Lieutenant General Jubal Anderson Early that if Union General Ulysses S. Grant was not stopped before he reached the James River, the battles of 1864-1865 would become a siege and then it would be “a mere matter of time” before Lee was forced to abandon the Confederate capital.<sup>2</sup>

Lee had battled Grant throughout the spring of 1864 in the Overland Campaign. Able to thwart Grant’s attempts to flank the Army of Northern Virginia, Lee was finally forced to dig in on the outskirts of Petersburg, Virginia, a significant industrial and supply hub about thirty miles south of Richmond. From June 1864 until March 1865, Grant steadily extended his lines. Lee’s men, clad in tatters and starving for want of provisions, held on as best they could. When Grant threatened to cut Lee’s remaining rail line to the south, Lee had no choice but to attack. On March 25, 1865, Lee hit Grant hard at Fort Stedman. As one local recalled, “It was a surprise and at first signally successful; but when thoroughly aroused to their danger, the enemy made a determined resistance, and under the pressure of superior numbers, Major General John Brown Gordon, who directed the attack, was compelled to retire.”<sup>3</sup>

After that failed offensive, Lee moved to block Union cavalry under the command of Major General Philip Henry Sheridan from taking Dinwiddie Court House. Fierce fighting continued into April 1, 1865 and led to the collapse of Confederate forces at Five Forks. Told to hold Five

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<sup>1</sup> Robert E. Lee to John C. Breckinridge, March 9, 1865, in Clifford Dowdey and Louis A. Manarin, eds., *The Wartime Papers of R.E. Lee* (Boston, MA: De Capo Press, 1987), 912-3.

<sup>2</sup> James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 743; McPherson cites Shelby Foote, *The Civil War: A Narrative*, 3 vols. (New York: Random House, 1958-1974), 3:442.

<sup>3</sup> Sallie Putnam, *Richmond During the War: Four Years of Personal Observation*, Bison Books 1996 ed., (New York and London: G. W. Carleton & Co. 1867), 360.

Forks at “all hazards,” Confederate General George Pickett was absent from the field, enjoying a shad bake well behind the lines.<sup>4</sup>

After Five Forks, Grant directed the Army of the Potomac to attack the entire front of Lee’s lines. That offensive broke the Army of Northern Virginia in three places and threatened Lee’s railroad escape route to Lynchburg. This reality forced Lee to abandon the Petersburg trenches which necessitated the evacuation of Richmond. Lee had warned Davis that were he outflanked, the President should “prepare for the necessity of evacuating our position on the James River at once, and also to consider the best means of accomplishing it, and our future course.”<sup>5</sup>

As early as February of 1865, rumors circulated that Richmond might have to be evacuated. Ordnance chief Josiah Gorgas recorded in his diary, “Here there is a good bit of consternation here lest Richmond be evacuated. An order has been given to remove all cotton and tobacco preparatory to burning it. All the departments have been notified to prepare to move.” Henri Garidel, a refugee from New Orleans noted, “The Yankees are closing in on us. Every day I await the order to evacuate Richmond.” Not long after that entry, Garidel observed, “Richmond is topsy-turvy. People speak of nothing but the immediate evacuation.” Another refugee, Judith McGuire, wrote presciently, “Oh I would that I could see Richmond burnt to the ground by its own people, without one brick left upon one another, before its defence-less [sic] inhabitants should be subjected to degradation.”<sup>6</sup>

April 2 dawned clear and warm as Richmonders left their homes to attend church services in the Confederate capital. Jefferson Davis was seated in his pew at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church when the sexton walked up to hand him a message. “An uneasy whisper ran through the congregation,” Sallie Putnam noted, “and intuitively they seemed possessed of the dreadful secret of the sealed dispatch—the unhappy condition of General Lee’s army and the necessity of evacuating Richmond.”<sup>7</sup> Word spread quickly and as people left their congregations, many made the decision to “evacuate the city with the government.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Douglas Southall Freeman, *R.E. Lee*, 4 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1934-1935), 4: 31-36. Freeman noted the order was found in Mrs. LaSalle Corbell Pickett’s *Pickett and His Men*, and nowhere else. Given Mrs. Pickett’s propensity for altering history, one wonders how accurate she is, especially given her husband’s conduct at Five Forks blatantly disobeyed the order she says he received.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Southall Freeman, ed., *Lee’s Dispatches; Unpublished letters of General Robert E. Lee, C.S.A. to Jefferson Davis and the War Department of the Confederate States of America, 1862-65* (New York: Putnam, 1957), 359-60.

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Woolfolk Wiggins, ed., *The Journals of Josiah Gorgas, 1857-1878* (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1995), April 30, 1865, 159; Michael Bedout Chesson and Leslie Jean Roberts, eds., *Exile in Richmond: The Confederate Journal of Henri Garidel* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2001), February 18 and February 28, 1865, 332; Judith McGuire, *A Southern Refugee’s Diary*, University of Nebraska Press 1995 ed. (New York: E.J. Hale & Son, 1867), March 11, 1865, 340.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 363.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

As the Confederate government bureaus began to pack up documents, the City Council met in emergency session. That body resolved to destroy whatever liquor was in the city to keep it from falling into the wrong hands. It also asked for local military units to be deployed to protect Richmond once the Confederate Army evacuated.

The general in charge of the Department of Richmond, Lieutenant General Richard Stoddert Ewell, had received an order as early as February to fire all the tobacco stored in the city to keep it from falling into the hands of the Federals, should Richmond need to be evacuated. Ewell set about to do just that on April 2. Both the City Council and Ordnance chief Josiah Gorgas begged Ewell to reconsider, suggesting that pouring turpentine on the tobacco would have the desired effect without the risk of a conflagration. But Ewell was adamant about following orders.<sup>9</sup>

As might have been expected, the flames from the tobacco fires spread quickly and soon endangered the Confederate Arsenal and Armory. One local who had watched the Prussians attack Erfurt in 1813 wrote, “Fire, fire, fire in all the streets. There was no end to the explosions. On top of it there was a light south wind which blew the flames still more toward the city. From the Armory to Rocketts [Wharf], a mile long, the lower part of the city was in flames.” Irish visitor Thomas Conolly noted, “I went out & what a sight at that hour, the streets filled with ragamuffins, chiefly niggers running and hurrying about & then another crash, another explosion & all the windows of the Spottswood [Hotel] [sic] are rent asunder as also all the stores in Main Street & now the plundering begins, men and women grabbing more than they can carry.”<sup>10</sup>

At the banks of the James River, Admiral Raphael Semmes of *CSS Alabama* fame, found himself in command of the James River Squadron, which consisted of three ironclads and five wooden ships. Secretary of the Navy Stephen Mallory ordered Semmes to destroy the fleet and then take his sailors to join Lee’s retreating army. According to Semmes, “The explosions shook the houses in Richmond, and might have waked the echoes of the night for forty miles around.”<sup>11</sup>

Most residents watched the fires and the looting with horror. Emma Mordecai wrote to a friend that she walked out toward Broad Street, a main thoroughfare. “[T]he pavement was covered with plate glass from the fine doors & windows and reduced to powder by the explosions.... All stores were closed and the street filthy.” Mordecai went on to note, As I turned the corner of 9<sup>th</sup> street from curb to curb was ankle deep with the fragments of Confederate printed blanks & other papers. ... Everything looked full of rubbish and disorder bespeaking ruin.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Wiggins, ed., *Journals of Josiah Gorgas*, April 30, 1865, 159.

<sup>10</sup> John Gottfried Lange Papers, Virginia Historical Society; Nelson Lankford, ed., *An Irishman in Dixie* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 83-84.

<sup>11</sup> Raphael Semmes, *Memoirs of Service Afloat During the War Between the States* (Baltimore: Kelly, Piet & Co., 1869), 809-10, 811-2.

<sup>12</sup> Emma Mordecai to Edward Cohen, April 5, 1865, Mordecai Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Another woman whose husband served in the Army of Northern Virginia, wrote that until April 2, Richmond exhibited “a singular ignorance concerning our reverses around Petersburg.” She did concede, “There were hunger and nakedness and death and pestilence everywhere,” but “we somehow laughed and sang and ... never believed in actual defeat.” Nonetheless, “As darkness came upon the city confusion and disorder increased. People were running around everywhere with plunder. ... Barrels of liquor were broken open and the gutters ran with whiskey ... There were plenty of staggering soldiers ... who had too much whiskey, rough women had it plentifully, and many negroes were drunk.”<sup>13</sup>

Several Confederate officers watched the army march out of Richmond and cross the Mayo Bridge into Manchester and saw the mob take control. One officer noted, “It was after sunset of a bright morning when from the Manchester high ground we turned to take our last look at the old city for which we had fought so long & so hard. It was a sad & a terrible & a solemn sight. I don’t know any moment in the whole war impressed me more deeply with all its stern realities than this.” He went on to observe, “The whole river front seemed to be in flames ... & the black smoke spreading and hanging over the city seemed to be full of dreadful portents.”<sup>14</sup>

The Tredegar Battalion, a group of workers organized by General Joseph Reid Anderson, owner of the Tredegar Iron Works, defended the Works against the angry mob. Only the Tredegar, of all the Richmond war establishments, escaped the torch.<sup>15</sup>

President Jefferson Davis, running to escape Federal authorities, issued a proclamation reassuring the people of Richmond that all was not lost. While admitting Lee had to evacuate the Petersburg line, he saw a silver lining: “Relieved from the necessity of guarding cities and particular points, important but not vital to our defense, with an army free to move ... and strike in detail ... operating on the interior of our own country, where supplies are more accessible ... nothing is now needed to render our triumph certain but the exhibition of our own unquenchable resolve.”<sup>16</sup>

Sadly, locals did not share Davis’s optimism. The day after the evacuation, Mayor Joseph Mayo and other members of Richmond’s City Council rode out of town to meet the advance elements of the Union army. Mayor Mayo handed a sheet of paper to a Union cavalryman that read, “to the General Commanding the United States Army in front of Richmond. General, The

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<sup>13</sup> Myrta Lockett Avery, *A Virginia Girl During the Civil War*, (New York: D. Appleton, 1907), 357, 360-1.

<sup>14</sup> Gary W. Gallagher, ed., *Fighting for the Confederacy: Military Memoirs of E. P. Alexander* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 519.

<sup>15</sup> Charles B. Dew, *Ironmaker for the Confederacy: Joseph Reid Anderson and the Tredegar Ironworks*, Library of Virginia 1990 ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), 286.

<sup>16</sup> United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 70 vols. in 128 parts (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, volume 46, part 1, p. 1382-3.

Army of the Confederate Government having abandoned the City of Richmond, I respectfully request that you will take possession of it with an organized force, to preserve order and protect women, children and property.” The Mayor then returned to Richmond to await the arrival of the Union vanguard, the XXIV Corps. At 8:15 a.m. on April 3, General Weitzel officially accepted the surrender at Richmond’s City Hall. Weitzel’s biggest challenge would be to put out the evacuation fires, rendered more difficult because prisoners escaping from the Virginia State Penitentiary had cut the fire hoses on the city’s fire trucks.<sup>17</sup>

People who stayed in the fire-ravaged city often found themselves homeless. Those poor creatures ventured to Capitol Square to seek shelter and to await the Federal army. Many were stunned at the rapid reversal of fortunes. For these Richmonders, the occupying force added insult to injury; the XXV Corps was comprised of United States Colored Troops.

General Weitzel faced a herculean task. Not only did the fires threaten more private homes, but the population was destitute. He immediately ordered that rations be distributed to the groups huddled in Capitol Square. As Weitzel wrote, “A sad sight met us on reaching Capitol Square. Their poor faces were perfect pictures of utter despair. It was a sight that would have melted a heart of stone.”<sup>18</sup>

One individual who welcomed the news that Richmond had fallen was President Abraham Lincoln. Steaming toward the Confederate capital with Admiral David Dixon Porter, Lincoln exclaimed, “Thank God that I have lived to see this! It seems to me that I have been dreaming a horrid dream for four years and now that nightmare is gone. I want to see Richmond.”<sup>19</sup> Porter had to navigate his flagship USS *Malvern* carefully through the James River because the Confederates had mined it and sunk vessels to prohibit the Union navy from getting to Rocketts Wharf. Lincoln, Porter and Lincoln’s son Tad went ashore, and bedlam greeted them. Besides the fires, masses of African Americans greeted the President. Admiral Porter remembered, “What an ovation [Lincoln] had, to be sure, from those so-called ignorant beings! They all had their souls in their eyes, and I don’t think I ever looked upon a scene where there were so many passionately happy faces.”<sup>20</sup>

Lincoln headed to General Weitzel’s headquarters which he had established in the White House of the Confederacy, located at 1205 East Clay Street. An African American reporter for the *Philadelphia Press*, noted, “The colored population was wild with enthusiasm. Old men thanked God in a very boisterous manner, and old women shouted on the pavement as high as they

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<sup>17</sup> Edward Hastings Ripley, *The Capture and Occupation of Richmond* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1907), 4-5; Godfrey Weitzel, *Richmond Occupied: Entry of the United States Forces into Richmond, VA. April 3, 1865* (Documents Department, Oklahoma State University Library), 11-13.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>19</sup> David D. Porter, *Incidents and Anecdotes of the Civil War* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1885), 294.

<sup>20</sup> Gallagher, *Fighting for the Confederacy*, 294, 297.

had ever done at a religious revival.”<sup>21</sup> Lincoln walked up the steps to cheers. War clerk J.B. Jones wrote in his diary that those huzzahs “were mostly from the negroes and Federals comprising the great mass of humanity. The white citizens felt annoyed,” according to Jones, “that the city should be held by mostly negro troops. If this measure were [sic] not avoidable, it was impolitic if conciliation be the purpose.”<sup>22</sup>

Other Northerners also flocked to Richmond to see the city that had symbolized the rebellion and that had withstood capture for four long years. One of the best accounts was George Alfred Townsend’s. Arriving at Rocketts Wharf, Townsend observed, “A few minutes’ walk and we tread the pavements of the capital ... there is no sound of life, but the stillness of the catacomb, only as our footsteps fall dull on the deserted sidewalk, and a funeral troop of echoes bump their elfin heads against the dead walls and closed shutters in reply. ‘And this is Richmond,’ says a melancholy voice. ‘And this is Richmond.’” He went on, “We are in the shadow of ruins. ... The wreck, the loneliness, seem interminable.”<sup>23</sup>

Just weeks before Richmond was evacuated, an editorial in the *Richmond Examiner* underscored the immense importance the capital of the Confederacy was to the Southern war effort:

The evacuation of Richmond would be the loss of all respect and authority towards the Confederate Government, the disintegration of the army, and the abandonment of the scheme of an independent Southern Confederation. Each contestant in the war has made Richmond the central object of all its plans and all its exertions. It has become the symbol of the Confederacy. Its loss would be material ruin to the cause, and in a moral point of view, absolutely destructive, crushing the heart and extinguishing the last hope of the country.<sup>24</sup>

With the fall of Richmond, the Confederacy lasted but one week before Lee surrendered his battered army to Grant at Appomattox Court House.

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<sup>21</sup> J.R. M. Blackett, ed., *Thomas Morris Chester, Black Civil War Correspondent: His Dispatches from the Virginia Front* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 295.

<sup>22</sup> J.R.M. Blackett, ed., *Thomas Morris Chester, Black Civil War Correspondent: His Dispatches from the Virginia Front* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1989), 295; J.B. Jones, *A Rebel War Clerk’s Diary*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, PA: J. B. Lippincott, 1866), 2:471.

<sup>23</sup> George Alfred Townsend, *Campaigns of a Non-Combatant* (New York: Arno Press, 1970), 336-7.

<sup>24</sup> *Richmond Examiner*, in Putnam, *Richmond During the War*, 375.