Sherman’s March To The Sea

From November 15 until December 21, 1864, Union General William T. Sherman led some 60,000 soldiers against whatever Confederates general John Bell Hood could defend Georgia with on a 285-mile march from Atlanta to Savannah, Georgia. The purpose of this “March to the Sea” was to frighten Georgia’s civilian population into abandoning the Confederate cause. Sherman’s soldiers did not destroy any of the towns in their path, but they stole food and livestock and burned the houses and barns of people who tried to fight back. The Yankees were “not only fighting hostile armies, but a hostile people,” Sherman explained; as a result, they needed to “make old and young, rich and poor, feel the hard hand of war.”

General Sherman’s troops captured Atlanta on September 2, 1864. This was an important triumph, because Atlanta was a railroad hub and the industrial center of the Confederacy: Its fall made even the most loyal Southerners doubt that they could win the war.

Sherman believed that the Confederacy got its from the material and moral support of sympathetic Southern whites. Factories, farms and railroads provided Confederate troops with the things they needed and if he could destroy those things, the Confederate war effort would collapse. Meanwhile, his troops could undermine Southern morale by making life so unpleasant for Georgia’s civilians that they would demand an end to the war.

Sherman’s troops marched south toward Savannah and the Union soldiers raided farms and plantations, stealing and slaughtering cows, chickens, turkeys, sheep and hogs and taking as much other food–especially bread and potatoes–as they could carry. (These groups of foraging soldiers were nicknamed “bummers,” and they burned whatever they could not carry.) The marauding Yankees needed the supplies, but they also wanted to teach Georgians a lesson: “it isn’t so sweet to secede,” one soldier wrote in a letter home, “as [they] thought it would be.”

In the end the Union was successful in breaking the Confederate Morale and ability to produce goods.