

CAPTURE & DESTRUCTION OF COLUMBIA, S. CAL. FEB. 17, 1865

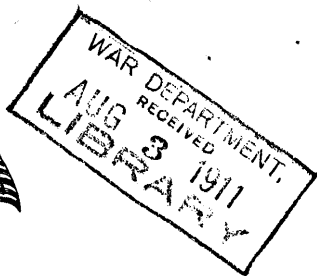
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# The Capture and Destruction of Columbia, South Carolina

FEBRUARY 17, 1865



PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AND RECOLLECTIONS OF

Major H. C. McArthur

22544

Fifteenth Iowa Infantry Volunteers, A. D. C. to General W. W. Belknap,

Commanding Crocker's Iowa Brigade,

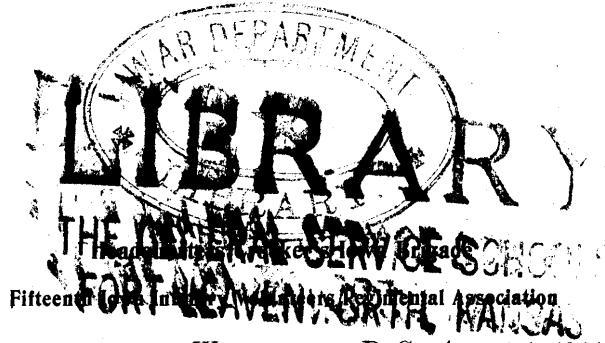
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WASHINGTON, D. C., August 1, 1911.

To CROCKER'S IOWA BRIGADE:

One of Iowa's boy soldiers from 1861 to 1865, and proud of it, and knowing the keen and patriotic interest always manifested by her citizens in the exploits of her "Boys in Blue," I beg to submit the following narrative of my personal experiences and recollections of the capture and destruction of Columbia, S. C., February 17, 1865. This story of fact is the fulfillment of a promise made years ago to the Fifteenth Iowa and Crocker's brigade comrades. In recent years many of my comrades in Iowa have repeatedly called my attention to accounts in the National Tribune, written by the members of the Thirtieth Iowa Infantry, relating to who was the first to enter and raise the Stars and Stripes in the city of Columbia, S. C., February 17, 1865. I was a member of the Fifteenth Iowa Infantry, and at that time aide-de-camp on the staff of Brig. Gen. William W. Belknap, commanding Crocker's Iowa Brigade, Seventeenth Corps, and being the person who first suggested the undertaking of crossing the Congaree River in front of the city, and urging the attempt be made, with others successfully accomplishing what we started out to do, namely, raise the first flag over the statehouse of South Carolina, I have a right to speak authoritatively of the enterprise.

For several years after the war closed we often heard through the National Tribune accounts of how members of Colonel Stone's Iowa Brigade, Fifteenth Corps, entered the city first and raised their colors on the statehouse. All of these erroneous assertions ceased in 1873, when the claims against the United States for damages of about a million and a half dollars were brought by British subjects before the British Claims Commission for cotton destroyed during the destruction of Columbia. It was then the facts were officially brought out. The Confederate general, Wade Hampton, was the principal prosecuting witness. If it could be proved that any of Sherman's army set fire to the cotton the United States would be liable to the value of the cotton destroyed. General Hampton testified very positively that members of Sherman's army set fire to the cotton. General Sherman did not believe his soldiers fired the cotton. He was not where he could see, yet he believed he was nearer the advance of his army when entering the city than General Hampton was to the rear of his army when leaving it. General Sherman, continuing, said: "I now

remember, however, that a small party from the Seventeenth Army Corps crossed the Congaree River in front of the city, advanced through its streets and raised their colors over the statehouse in advance of all other troops, and reported stragglers of the rebel army pillaging stores and firing the cotton which was piled along the main street; that I [Sherman] had treated the exploit informally at the time, but the actors, if living, will now come forward as the most important witnesses for the Government, because members of that party entered the main street of the city three-quarters of an hour before the advance skirmishers of Colonel Stone's brigade of the Fifteenth Corps." (See letter of General Sherman, Sept. 12, 1873, in Washington Daily Chronicle, Sept. 15, 1873.)

#### WHO FIRED THE COTTON.

General Belknap, our brigade commander, was Secretary of War at the time and furnished General Sherman with the names of the officers of the party. The officers were Lieut. Col. J. C. Kennedy, Thirteenth Iowa, Maj. William H. Goodrell, and myself, of the Fifteenth Iowa, both members of Belknap's staff at the time. Each was directed to execute his separate affidavit setting forth the facts, and all of us were communicated with by the Secretary of War August 22, 1873, and directed to hold ourselves in readiness to appear in Washington before the British Claims Commission. Our several affidavits were regarded conclusive. They were deemed sufficient to establish the fact that the cotton destroyed at Columbia was fired by stragglers from the Confederate army, and the decision was rendered in favor of the Government. Thus our early, sudden, and successful dash for the statehouse that eventful morning saved to Uncle Sam a vast amount of money.

#### WE WERE EYEWITNESSES.

Neither Colonel Stone, any of his brigade, nor any of the Fifteenth Corps were called on for evidence. They were not aware of any of these facts, all of which occurred before their entrance into the city, but did occur while four Crocker Brigade men were rushing along Main Street that morning.

For many years after 1873 no attempt was made to deprive the Thirteenth Iowa flag the well-merited honor of being placed first over the statehouse. I have been frequently urged by many comrades, and others, to make a detailed statement of the inception and consummation of the undertaking. I realize the importance, too, of each participant in acts of this character making statements of the things as they actually occurred.

Though more than forty-five years have passed since that morning, the stirring events, and they were stirring, are as clear to my mind as if they occurred but yesterday.

Thursday, February 16, 1865, Crocker's Iowa Brigade—the Eleventh, Thirteenth, Fifteenth, and Sixteenth Iowa Infantry—Fourth Division, Seventeenth Army Corps, went into camp on the west bank of the Congaree River opposite Columbia, S. C. General Belknap and his staff were viewing the city from the top of a bluff when General Sherman and his staff rode up. After taking a survey of the city through his field glass, General Sherman turned to General Belknap and said, "General, it will be a great honor to the men who first enter the city and unfurl the first Stars and Stripes on that historic old statehouse." In the old statehouse building was where the first ordinance of secession was passed. I heard General Sherman's remark. I turned to Major Goodrell, also of the staff, and said, "Let us make an effort to cross the river." He enthusiastically agreed. Belknap's permission was obtained and Lieutenant Colonel Kennedy, a brave and daring young officer in command of the Thirteenth Iowa, with a squad of his regiment, volunteered to accompany us.

#### CROSS OVER IN A LEAKY BOAT.

The bridge, about half a mile below, had been destroyed by the Confederates, but we found an old rickety, leaky, flat ferryboat, similar in shape to that used on the Iowa rivers in 1856–1860. For packing purposes the negroes found a bunch of flax tow; we also used some of our flannel shirts, torn in strips. We labored all that afternoon and late into the night repairing, calking leaks, making oars, etc. The negroes were of great assistance to us. They were greatly surprised that we would attempt the crossing in that old boat, declaring it would not hold together half way across that rough and swift river. The Confederate pickets on the opposite side of the river were firing on us, and our pickets returning the fire vigorously. Three of our men were wounded the afternoon of the 16th, one killed and one wounded the morning of the 17th. About 9 a. m., Friday, February 17, 1865, all was ready. Recent shots gave us every reason to expect hot work while crossing or when reaching the other shore. We divested ourselves of shoes and outer garments, with instructions to jump into the river if the firing got too hot and endeavor to keep the boat between ourselves and the enemy and drift, if possible, back to the west bank. Everyone not at the oars had a gun with supply of ammunition, each keenly watching the other shore, ready for action.

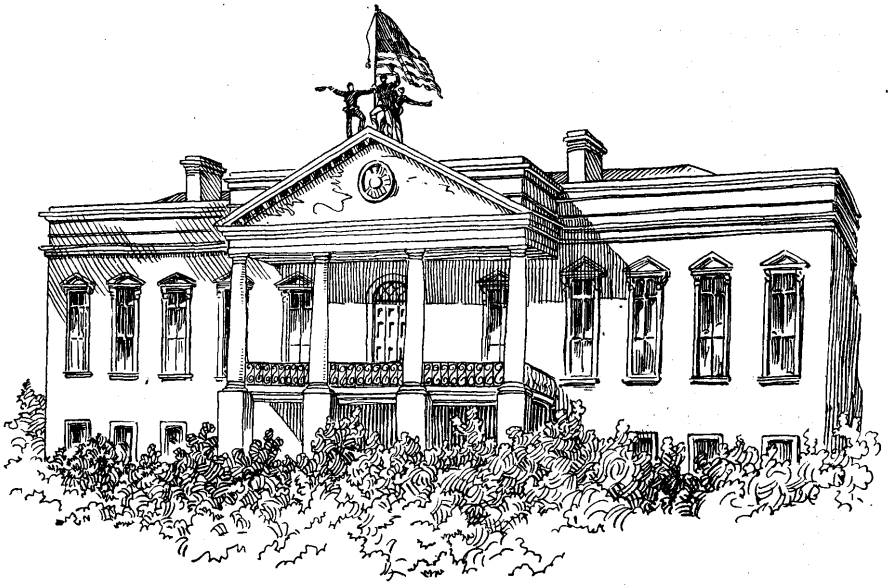
When the word was given to "cut loose," we numbered twenty-four, including the three officers. As the boat swung out into the stream three of our number jumped into the river and waded back; this left twenty-one all told. We pulled for a small island near the other shore, reaching it without much difficulty. Some of us crawled up through the willows to "spy out the land;" I assure you we scanned the bank in every direction most carefully and critically, but could see no one. We knew the Fifteenth Corps was to come down from the north after crossing the Saluda and Broad Rivers, which form the Congaree a short distance above Columbia. We returned to the boat, donned our clothing, pulled boldly and rapidly around the point of the island to the shore, and rushed up the embankment ready for most any kind of reception. To our great surprise and delight we found the Confederate pickets had been withdrawn; we could see them about a quarter of a mile down the river marching away. A half hour's delay in starting on our part had, unquestionably, saved the lives of our squad from shot or drowning. We landed at the foot of a street running east and west and near an old mill. Arranging with negroes to return with the boat for more troops, we started immediately for the statehouse.

#### IMPRESS A HORSE AND BUGGY.

At a cross street we intercepted a man in a one-horse buggy, rushing south, evidently intending to escape the Fifteenth Corps, little expecting to meet us. It took but a moment to convince the owner that we needed the rig worse than he did. Dumping him and effects into the street, Major Goodrell and the color bearer, with the flag, banner, and a gun, jumped into the buggy; Colonel Kennedy and myself, back to back, sat on the cross bar over the back spring and literally "hung on." After directing the remainder of our party to follow rapidly, Goodrell put whip to the horse and he was soon on a dead run. We ran east until arriving at what seemed to us a main street; with the statehouse appearing at the head of it. Here we turned south. No troops, Blue or Gray, in sight. Putting the horse under whip again we were soon going at breakneck speed. Within two blocks of the statehouse, in a side street, half a block ahead, I discovered a squad of Confederate cavalymen formed in line, ready to fire. I shouted "lookout" to Goodrell, but before he could stop the horse we had covered the half block and reached the cross street where the cavalry had been standing. They had fired, overshot us, whirled, and were galloping away frantically. I sprang to the ground, snatched the gun from the buggy, and fired; one of the riders fell on the edge of the sidewalk; his body lay there most of the day. That shot was said to have been the last

fired at a Confederate in Columbia that day. At this time we four men were at least half a mile from the balance of our party, the nearest Union troops, and surrounded by enemies. The mayor was at that time, as we learned later in the day, out making a formal surrender of the city to Colonel Stone, of the Fifteenth Corps. The rebel soldiers and citizens who witnessed our approach undoubtedly knew the city was being formally surrendered and supposed the Union Army were at our heels. Had the facts been known to them, they could, and certainly would, have overwhelmed and perhaps killed us four and captured our flags. Immediately after the firing ceased many citizens came out of what we supposed to be a hotel near us, which, I now learn, was the old city hall. One kindly disposed individual had a pitcher of brandy and asked us to take a drink; but we declined. We stood near the buggy and back to back the better to observe the approach from all directions, ready to act promptly on the offensive or defensive. The color bearer reloaded his gun, and with our revolvers drawn, with no gentle words either, we admonished those approaching to "Stand back, we will fill full of holes the first man getting too near, stand back." Very soon the negroes came rushing out shouting "Bres de Lo'd de Yankees hab come." I called one colored fellow, asking him if he knew where the old mill was located, and he said he did. I told him a squad of Union soldiers were coming up the street from the old mill, to run fast, meet them, say the flag had been fired on and to come doublequick. I think that boy jumped 20 feet the first jump, shouted "Bres de Lo'd," then flew. We remained in our isolated and rather perilous position until the rest of our party came up. On their arrival we deployed across the street and advanced to the Capitol buildings. We found two, the first unfinished, of granite and brick, doors not hung, no floors, no sash in window frames, no roof, no plastering, a mere skeleton; work thereon seeming to have been abandoned months before. Major Goodrell took the banner of the Thirteenth Iowa and, accompanied by the banner bearer, Jacob Binkerd, Company B, that regiment, unfurled it from the top walls of that building.

Colonel Kennedy, the color bearer, with the flag, and myself crossed the street southwest, not over 200 feet away, to the old frame statehouse, ran up the outside steps and began forcing the doors open. The janitor came hurriedly with the keys, unlocked the doors, directed the way to the garret and to the top of the building. I distinctly call to mind how terribly dark and musty it was up in that old garret. We could not see our hands before us. The ladder leading up to the trapdoor was what we wanted. I succeeded in finding a small piece of scantling and soon knocked off a piece of siding to admit light. Then we all made a break for the ladder and soon were on top and had the flag flying.



Raising the Flag on the old Statehouse at Columbia

LOCATION OF THE FIFTEENTH CORPS.

At this juncture we could see the deployed and advanced skirmishers of the Fifteenth Corps about a mile and a half north. In a few minutes the skirmishers rallied, then we felt much easier. Almost immediately our battery west of the river began a rapid fire. Then the Fifteenth Corps skirmishers deployed again on the doublequick. Imagine our anxiety. We feared the enemy had passed between us and the river, attempting to turn the right of the Fifteenth Corps. If so, a battle would be fought and probably death or capture would be our portion. A few minutes seemed like hours. Our battery ceased firing and it dawned upon us that the firing was a salute to the success of our undertaking. General Belknap and hundreds on the west bank of the river were anxiously watching for the appearance of the flag, and when Old Glory appeared the order to fire the salute was given and performed with a will. When the firing began, Colonel Stone, of the Fifteenth Corps, who was then receiving the surrender of the city, did not understand it any more than we did. It was at this time to which the Thirtieth Iowa comrades refer, when Colonel Stone drew his revolver and informed the mayor in words with fire attached, if he proved treacherous his life would pay the penalty. The mayor fell on his knees, calling on God to witness his sincerity and honesty in surrendering the city; that he had no knowledge whatever of the cause of the firing. Maj. R. D. Cramer, Thirtieth Iowa,

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who had command of the skirmish line, and who I understand advanced and received the mayor and party with Iowa flags, as present and heard what was said. He has often told me about it, and of their great surprise and anxiety when the battery on the other side and down the river from them opened fire. The major said he had his eye on the marshal, and would have shot him at the least show of treachery. I know Major Cramer; he would have done just what he said. A braver or more gallant soldier Iowa did not enlist. At this point I desire to call particular attention to the fact that the identical time when the firing of our battery began and the city was being formally surrendered to Colonel Stone, of the Fifteenth Corps, and Major Cramer was deploying his skirmishers again, and on the doublequick, the little squad from Crocker's Iowa Brigade, Seventeenth Corps, had already taken forcible possession of the city of Columbia, and were at that moment on the old and new State buildings with the Thirtieth Iowa flag and banner unfurled, while the advance skirmishers of Stone's brigade, Colonel Stone and the Thirtieth Iowa flag with them, were yet one and a half miles north of the statehouse. Shortly after the firing (the reason for which was our appearance on the statehouse with our flag) we were overjoyed to see the Fifteenth Corps skirmishers rallying again, and soon our troops marching toward the city. Colonel Kennedy directed our color bearer to remain with the colors, after which he and I went below. In a short time thereafter, while standing in the rotunda and facing the outside door, the first person we saw enter was a lieutenant, rushing into the building with a flag, from the Ninth Iowa Infantry, of Stone's brigade, and inquiring the way to the roof. I asked him what he wanted to do. "Place my flag on this building," he answered. I took out my watch and said, "Lieutenant, we have had our flag flying three-quarters of an hour." In great amazement he said, "The hell you have, where did you come from?" I answered, "From Crocker's Iowa Brigade, Seventeenth Corps," and explained how we had crossed the river, etc. His very sensible remark was, "Well, it is all right so Iowa gets the honor." I have always regretted not getting his name. If he is living I would like to hear from him. I feel sure he will corroborate all I have said with reference to what passed between us on that occasion.

## THE THIRTIETH IOWA REMOVES THE FLAG.

I now come to an unexpected movement on the Columbia trestle board, wherein the Thirtieth Iowa becomes very conspicuous. They say, "Everything is fair in war." I guess it is. At any rate, in this case it was a mighty good (I thought serious) joke on that squad of daring and usually

vigilant boys of Crocker's Iowa Brigade. Let me tell it. After Colonel Kennedy and I had left the top of the building our color bearer concluded to get a relic of some kind from that old historic building. Securely fastening his flagstaff, thinking of course all would be safe, as we were now surrounded by our friends, he went down to the hall of representatives to see what he could find. On his return the flag was missing, and two soldiers of the Thirtieth Iowa had their flag unfurled. Colonel Stone's brigade, Thirtieth Iowa in it, had, about noon, taken formal possession of the city and were establishing provost guards. The Thirtieth Iowa boys declared and insisted no flag was found on the building when they appeared on the roof. Of course we knew they were not telling the truth, and told them so in very plain words; but we were not at that time able to find any trace of our flag or staff. I assure you we were not in a very amiable frame of mind about it. When our brigade came over in the evening they would have come pretty near whipping their weight in wildcats had it been necessary to have recovered our flag. We did not see our flag again for two weeks. On March 3 our brigade had gone into camp near Cheraw, S. C. Troops were passing and some of the Thirteenth Iowa boys strolled down to the roadside and some of the passing regiments asked what regiment was camped there. "Thirteenth Iowa," was answered. "Wonder if you would like to have your flag again." "Yes, we would," was answered eagerly, "What regiment is this?" "Thirtieth Iowa." Several members of the Thirteenth Iowa followed the Thirtieth into camp, and *found their flag secreted with one of the companies. They secured and returned it to the Thirteenth Regiment amid great rejoicing.* Each reader may figure out for himself how it was possible for Stone's brigade to have planted their flag on the statehouse first, keeping in mind the fact that while the battery was firing a salute for us the Thirtieth Iowa with its flag and Colonel Stone were a mile and a half north of the statehouse. Had they destroyed our flag and not acknowledged the fact, it would have been more difficult for us to have satisfied others that our claim was true; but such brave and loyal Iowa boys could do no damage to Old Glory, they loved it as truly as we did; they preserved it to return to us. Our finding them "with the goods," however, was proof positive that our flag was flying over the statehouse, and found by them, as they afterwards admitted, when they first appeared on the building. If those two comrades who found the Thirteenth Iowa flag on the building unguarded, took it down, took the flag from the staff, threw the staff down in that dark garret, secreted the flag and carried it away with them, as they admitted and explained to the Thirteenth Iowa boys when the flag was returned, will now come forward and tell us all about it, all will enjoy the narrative. We have forgiven you boys years





and years ago. For over twenty years after the war I was in business in Memphis, Mo., and lived a near neighbor to Maj. R. D. Cramer; he resides there yet. I remember well when W. D. Sigler, of his regiment, brought the major in my place of business and introduced him as the major of his regiment, Thirtieth Iowa. After a few words, I said, "Oh, yes, I remember the Thirtieth Iowa, can never forget it, they stole our flag from the statehouse at Columbia, S. C." This salutation soon developed a pleasant surprise for both of us. Our conversation soon brought out the fact that he was the officer who was in command of the advance skirmishers of the Fifteenth Corps, and I was one of the men of Crocker's Iowa Brigade, Seventeenth Corps, perched on top of the old statehouse, at Columbia, S. C., watching keenly every movement of his line of skirmishers. I referred to their rallying as we first appeared on the roof with our flag, that almost immediately our battery opened fire, then his skirmishers deployed again, on the doublequick; how very anxious we were, not knowing at the time the cause of the firing. Major Cramer said, "Yes, I will never forget those anxious moments." Then he explained how surprised they were at the firing, that Colonel Stone at the time was receiving the surrender of the city, and suspecting the mayor of treachery, he, Stone, jerked his revolver out, telling the mayor his life would pay the penalty if he proved treacherous, as told previously herein. All of this was reviewed by Major Cramer in a most interesting manner. The acquaintance formed at that time has ripened into life-long friendship.

#### SAW THE COTTON BURNERS.

As we dashed up Main Street that eventful morning we passed in the middle of each block large piles of cotton. Confederate soldiers were pouring turpentine on the cotton and setting fire to it. The bales had been ripped open and tufts pulled up so that it would burn the more readily. Many stragglers of the Confederate army were pillaging stores. During the day attempts were made to extinguish the fire in the cotton; but in the evening when the wind blew a gale the smoldering flames in the cotton were fanned into glowing embers again, which was soon communicated to the frame buildings and all destroyed. General Belknap and staff were in the saddle nearly all night rendering aid where possible.

#### COMMENDED FOR THEIR SUCCESSFUL EXPLOIT.

The undertaking of crossing the rugged Congaree in that old rickety boat was, as expressed in orders, hazardous and very dangerous. Gen. Giles A. Smith in official orders commended the officers and men for their successful exploit.

#### AN HISTORICAL FACT.

That the flag of the Thirteenth Iowa was the first Old Glory to float over that hotbed of secession, Columbia, S. C., February 17, 1865, three-quarters of an hour before any other flag could, under the circumstances, have been in the statehouse building, is an historical fact which can not be successfully contradicted. Take your medicine boys, there is glory enough for all. There is no discount on the grand fighting record of either the Fifteenth or Seventeenth Corps. They, as the Army of the Tennessee, stood shoulder to shoulder from Shiloh to Washington. Neither ever left a battlefield in defeat, neither Grant nor Sherman ever felt uneasy with them in front. But you must admit, my comrades, that Crocker's Iowa Brigade got away with your entire baggage wagon on that occasion. The next minute, had it been necessary, we would have stood with you to the death in defense of the dear old flag.

#### VISIT TO COLUMBIA, S. C.

Several years ago, with my wife, I visited Columbia, S. C. We were on the ground near the old mill site. I passed again over the route of our dash for the statehouse of over thirty-seven years before. The unfinished building of February 17, 1865, had been completed only a few months. The State officers were old Confederate soldiers; they were very courteous and glad to see me. I informed them I was one of the party who raised the first flags over the old and new State buildings February 17, 1865. At my request one of the officers accompanied me to the top of the new building. The ground north appeared about the same as in 1865. I told him of the position and firing of our battery on the opposite side of the river. I also pointed out to him the location, as it seemed to me, where the Fifteenth Corps skirmishers were in line and the point of rallying. He said, "Well, that is about the location where the mayor surrendered the city." I asked him the distance from the statehouse. He said, "A mile and a half or two miles." I then explained to him fully our exploit, etc. He seemed very much interested, remarked that it seemed almost miraculous that we made that crossing in safety in that old boat. The current of the Congaree River is very swift there now, as it was in 1865.

#### AN EYEWITNESS TO THE FIRING OF COLUMBIA, S. C.

There is one important feature about this Columbia achievement never given the consideration deserved. The result of that exploit, and that

alone, secured the necessary evidence which saved the Government not only about one and a half million of dollars, but refuted the dastardly charge made by the Confederates that "Sherman's army pillaged and burned a city which had been surrendered in good faith." I met and indignantly denied this charge when visiting Columbia a few years ago. I have read two books, one by a Confederate colonel, James Gibbes, entitled "Who Burned Columbia," and the other, entitled "Butler's Cavalry," in which they charge us with burning the city and other crimes. For garbled extracts, outrageous exaggerations, and misrepresentations it would be hard to get more in two books. The State officers expressed a desire to have me meet the author of one of the books—he resided there—and talk over matters. I had no objections; but I did not meet him as he was out of the city. I learned, however, that he, at the *time* of our *entering*, was *leaving* the city with Hampton's cavalry. He, in his book, says, "I was 11 miles from Columbia that night," yet he claims to know just what occurred there. I told those present that I was an eyewitness to the Confederate soldiers firing the cotton and pillaging the stores, and it must be apparent to them that I knew more about it than he did, and I most certainly do.

Persons reading "Who Burned Columbia" and "Butler's Cavalry," and believe what they read there about Columbia, without investigation, as so many do, must conclude that General Sherman, his officers and men, were the worst lot of unhung scoundrels on earth. Happily there is no foundation in fact to their serious charges. They are "ropes of sand." The city was destroyed and pillaged, that is certain. I was an eyewitness thereof. I was right there on the spot. Saw the first cotton fired that morning, saw the first pillaging done. It was about 10 a. m., February 17, 1865, and at that time the Confederate soldiers were pouring terpen-tine on and firing the cotton as stated above. At the same time I witnessed other Confederate soldiers with silverware, jewelry, and other goods coming out of stores already broken into, and other stores being broken open. Let me mention one instance of pillage which drew our especial attention. Within two blocks of the old city hall, where we were fired upon and forced to halt, a Confederate cavalryman backed his horse up in front of a closed store door, spurred the animal quick and hard, causing it to kick viciously, and the doors flew open, and a crowd of Confederate soldiers were there ready for business, and the pillaging continued. We four men witnessed all of these acts of pillage by the Confederates while passing down and halting on Main Street about 10 a. m., an hour before it were possible for Stone's brigade to have reached the city hall. We four were at this time one-half mile in advance of the remainder of our own squad and a mile and a half in advance of Colonel

Stone's brigade, yet all of this robbery, plundering, and firing is charged to General Sherman and his army. The time of day the mayor started to the front, the surrender made to Colonel Stone, and his entry into the city, as recorded by the Confederates, agree very well with our own. General Hampton, Dr. Goodwin, the mayor, and Messrs. McKinzie, Bates, and Stork, the three aldermen who accompanied the mayor, and other citizens, all agree it was 9 o'clock a. m. when General Hampton notified the mayor, who, with the three aldermen, proceeded to the front and surrendered the city; and all agree, too, the surrender to Colonel Stone was at 10 o'clock a. m. This also agrees with the account by Generals Sherman and Howard. It was very little after 10 a. m. when our party of four in the buggy reached the scene of depredations along Main Street. I find my own time of the entry of Colonel Stone and his brigade and the account of the Confederates substantially agree. Mr. Bates, one of the aldermen who accompanied the mayor and returned in the carriage with Colonel Stone, says, "It was about 11.30 a. m. when we arrived;" Colonel Gibbes says it was 11 a. m. when Colonel Stone reached the city. Although the Claims Court years ago decided the responsibility of the fire rested with the Confederate army, the charges against Sherman and his army continue to this day to be iterated and reiterated. Only recently I received a letter from Mr. Brooks, the author of "Butler's Cavalry." Although I made no inquiry regarding the destruction of Columbia, he could not resist the temptation to draw my attention to *his* account of Sherman's destruction of Columbia. I know positively Sherman's army was not responsible, and I know just as positively the Confederate soldiers were responsible, for its destruction. I was there, Mr. Brooks was not. I saw tufts of burning cotton from the piles fired in the morning by the Confederate soldiers blown to buildings, the buildings ignited and consumed. I saw burning shingles carried by the wind and light on buildings blocks away and soon the buildings would be in a blaze. Mr. Brooks did not, he was 11 miles away.

I am loth to dwell on these scenes of destruction. In my first article on the capture and destruction of Columbia, I had no desire or intention to particularize regarding specific acts of Confederate soldiers, but I find to protect our army from unjust criticism it is necessary to tell all the facts. For over forty years these charges have been continually and persistently hawked about. They are false. It matters not what orders were given by Generals Beauregard and Hampton regarding the burning of the cotton. The fact remains and can not be successfully contradicted, that the cotton was being fired, which caused the destruction of the city, and stores pillaged, by the rear guard and stragglers of the Confederate army before we reached city hall on Main Street about 10 a. m., where

we were fired upon by what, we were informed at the time, was a part of the rear guard of Wheeler's cavalry. The book, "Who Burned Columbia," says Wheeler's cavalry passed down Main Street at 10 a. m., leaving the city, which leads me to remark, had our arrival been a few minutes sooner we would have encountered that force and been killed or captured; no doubt about that. If the one-hundredth part of the mean deeds found mentioned in these books, asserted by the committee of "prominent citizens," and shown in the affidavits of sixty most "respectable residents," all charged to General Sherman and his army, were true, then the British Claims Commission would not have been five minutes deciding the Government liable for the value of the cotton destroyed. But the court did not so find, neither will any well informed and reasonably disposed person after careful investigation believe the charges true. Some of their charges are so ridiculously absurd it is surprising that men with any claim to fairness would have printed such trash. For instance, they claim to have found a letter, written by one Lieutenant Myer, of Boston, Mass., belonging to a Massachusetts regiment, to his wife; saying among other disreputable things, "That the regular forage detail was instructed daily to bring in all of the jewelry, silverware, etc., and have it divided among the officers and men. That he had at least a quart of valuable rings and pins, etc. That one of the corps commanders (a major general), disguised in rough clothes, accompanied the foragers and proved one of the most accomplished pillagers." Both books publish this "prepared for a purpose" letter, and General Hampton and a number of the "prominent citizens" all refer to it as fact. I was in active service nearly four years, with Grant, then Sherman; I was in the city of Columbia from about 10 a. m., February 17, 1865, until early morning of the 18th. In company with Major Goodrell took advantage of the horse and buggy we had captured and visited all parts of the city during the day of the 17th. Then when my horse came over in the evening I was in the saddle most of the night, riding with General Belknap from point to point in the city, aiding many helpless and aged people, ladies and children, frequently calling on the passing soldiers for assistance, and all responded cheerfully; none declined. I continued as aide-de-camp through to Washington, always in position to see or learn of wanton acts or plunder. I saw no such disreputable actions as are charged to our army. They are not true. That there were isolated acts of pillage and crime we do not deny. There were bad men in the army as well as out. Four years of terrible warfare as experienced by our army must have produced some bad characters. It was not surprising if men were found here and there given to unlawful practices at times. No doubt there were such in our army as well as in the Confederate army. I

have no doubt there was destruction of property by some of our escaped prisoners. I will give a case. A citizen came to Major Goodrell and myself with the information that four escaped Union soldier prisoners were secreted in the garret of his house. He had been caring for them the best he could. He pointed out his house. We found the four soldiers as he had said. Although emaciated and little vitality left, they became almost wild with joy and excitement when they were sure we were real friends from the Union Army. They hugged us, they shouted, laughed, and cried. I remember one, a Sixth Pennsylvania soldier, and I feared he would go crazy sure enough. They told us of their abuse and hardships, especially of some "respectable citizens" of Columbia, too cowardly to enter the Confederate service, they and their wives would call at the prison, spit in the faces of the prisoners, call them measly Yankee dogs and poltroons, should be shot down like curs, and all manner of insult to helpless prisoners of war. I admit my own blood boiled with indignation during the narrative. During the night, when the fire was well under way, I met three of these men with other soldiers, and they were hunting the house of the men, and the men themselves, who had treated them so shamefully. I have always been satisfied if they succeeded in finding their man or men, justice would be meted out. Who dare say these Union soldiers were not justified in meting out justice as they thought best. However, we quit the strife in 1865, and we were in hearty accord with Grant's "Let us have peace," but the South Carolinians continue to sow seeds of discord from generation to generation. On July 15, 1911, the Washington Post contained the following dispatch: "After the South Carolina board of education adopted Thompson's 'History of the United States,' for use in the public schools during the next five years, Gov. Cole L. Blease objected to the book because it was neutral on the question of the responsibility for the burning of Columbia in 1865. The governor insisted that the book should state that General Sherman burned Columbia, though this is a moot point. The author, 'Waddy' Thompson, of Atlanta, Ga., to-day consented to put the blame on General Sherman. The author is a son of the late Hugh Thompson, formerly governor of South Carolina, and later Assistant Secretary of the Treasury under President Cleveland." Lovers of truth, justice, and right, what do you think of the above perversion of history? Is it not time to protect the truth? We have remained silent for over forty years. Forbearance has ceased to be a virtue. We feel justified in bringing to public attention truthful statements for the purpose of protecting our record against the persistent and false accusations we find hawked about from year to year. South Carolina was the first, and her prominent citizens and politicians the most determined, in acts of disloyalty. They pro-

claimed that "One South Carolina soldier could and would whip three Yankees;" that "South Carolina would end the war speedily;" "Just stand back and see South Carolina do the fighting;" and much of such nonsense. So long as the horrors of war were confined to other States, just so long was South Carolina bold, defiant, and full of self conceit. The moment the effect of real war was felt within her own borders, that minute she began to whine and lament in a very loud voice. They have made more complaint, fuss, and misrepresentation than all the other States together. No wonder the people of Georgia hoped "that Sherman and his army would give South Carolina hell—just what she deserved;" and in North Carolina, the expression, "South Carolina has felt the heavy hand of war, she got hell from start to finish." The Southern States seemed to find consolation in believing punishment would be or had been meted out to South Carolina by her being in the track of active warfare. She should have taken her medicine without so much murmuring. At any rate it would have been the manly part to have accepted her own responsibility instead of blaming Sherman and his army with destruction and pillage caused by the actions of her own soldiery and citizens. General Sherman and his army had no desire to leave their homes to be at war in South Carolina or anywhere else. They went, however, with the same feeling of determined patriotism expressed to this same South Carolina by President Andrew Jackson, many years ago when she attempted to secede, repeated by us in 1861, viz, "By the eternal the Union must and shall be preserved." We four men, dashing along Main Street, Columbia, S. C., that morning at that opportune time, are the only ones from whom the correct information as to who fired the cotton and first pillaged stores could have been secured. When we appeared the Confederates soon scampered away. Save the members of our party, and we were very busy at something else, there were no Union soldiers within a mile and a half of that point. No one there to do such acts except the Confederate soldiers, and they were industriously applying the torch and pillaging when we appeared along Main Street at about 10 a. m.

The exploit, too, was attended with as much or more danger to life than many acts which called for medals of honor. Our aim was to succeed in our undertaking regardless of danger. We succeeded, and in its accomplishment the Government was greatly benefited, and we are glad.

The large Confederate flag, photograph herewith, was captured during the exploit by Maj. William H. Goodrell, Fifteenth Iowa Volunteers, by him found stretched along the upper edge of the north wall of the unfinished new Capitol Building, as he, accompanied by the banner bearer, Jacob Binkerd, Company B, Thirteenth Iowa Volunteers, displayed the Thirteenth Iowa banner over the walls thereof. The flag is made of blue



Flag captured by Major Goodrell, Fifteenth Iowa Infantry,  
at Columbia, S. C., February 17, 1865.

bunting, size 20 by 36 feet; a palmetto tree 10 feet in height forms a white insert in the center of the flag; a white insert in the shape of a crescent, measuring 4 feet from point to point appears in the upper left-hand corner.

The following are the facts connected with the capture of this flag. I was present, know it to be correct, and am glad to give this statement to the memory of one of the most gallant of soldiers and brave as the bravest. The flag was captured at Columbia, S. C., Friday, February 17, 1865, by then First Lieut. William H. Goodrell, Fifteenth Iowa Volunteer Infantry, picket officer on the staff of Gen. William W. Belknap, commanding the Third (Crocker's) Iowa Brigade, Fourth Division, Seventeenth Army Corps, and deposited with the State Historical Society of Iowa, at Iowa City, Iowa, by General Belknap.

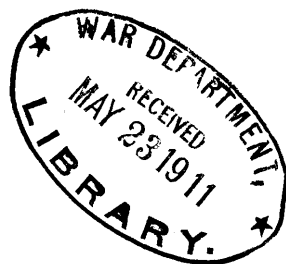
H. C. McARTHUR, *Fifteenth Iowa Volunteers;*  
*Brevet Major, Aide-de-camp to General Belknap,*  
*Commanding Crocker's Iowa Brigade,*  
*Fourth Division, Seventeenth Army Corps.*

# THE CAPTURE AND DESTRUCTION

OF

COLUMBIA, SOUTH CAROLINA

February 17, 1865

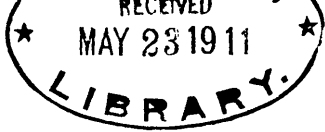


PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AND RECOLLECTIONS OF

Major H. C. McArthur

15th Iowa Infantry Volunteers, A. D. C. to General W. W. Belknap,  
Commanding Crocker's Brigade,  
Seventeenth Army Corps

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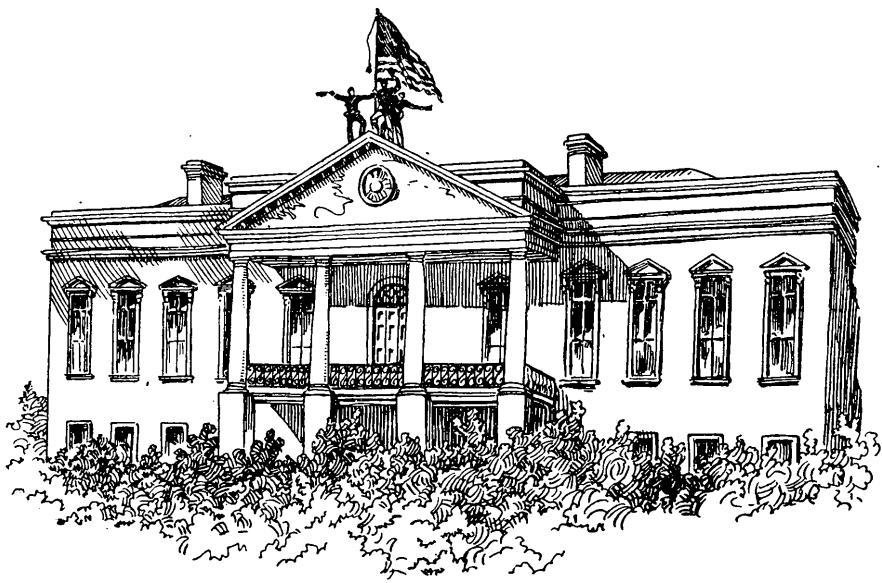


## THE CAPTURE AND DESTRUCTION OF COLUMBIA

Many comrades have called my attention to accounts in The National Tribune written by Comrades Van Norstrand, Co. B, and Phelps, of Co. F, 30th Iowa, and others, relating to the first to enter and raise the Stars and Stripes in the city of Columbia, Feb. 17, 1865. I was a member of the 15th Iowa, and at that time Aid-de-Camp on the staff of Gen. Wm. W. Belknap, commanding Crocker's Iowa Brigade, Seventeenth Corps. Being the person who first suggested the undertaking of crossing the Congaree River in front of the city, I urged the attempt be made, and, with others, successfully accomplished what we started out to do, viz, raise the first flag over the State House of Columbia, I have a right to speak authoritatively of the enterprise.

brought out. The Confederate General, Wade Hampton, was the principal prosecuting witness. If it could be proved that any of Sherman's army set fire to the cotton, the United States would be liable to the value of the cotton destroyed. Gen. Hampton testified very positively that members of Sherman's army set fire to the cotton. Gen. Sherman in his testimony did not believe his soldiers fired the cotton; he was not where he could see, yet he verily believed he was nearer the advance of his army when entering the city than Gen. Hampton was to the rear of his army when leaving it.

Gen. Sherman, continuing, said: "I now remember, however, that a small party from the Seventeenth Corps crossed the Congaree River in front of



### RAISING THE FLAG ON THE OLD STATE HOUSE AT COLUMBIA.

For several years after the war closed we often heard, thru The National Tribune, accounts of how members of Col. Stone's Iowa Brigade, Fifteenth Corps, entered the city first and raised their colors on the State House. All of these erroneous assertions ceased in 1873, when the claims against the United States for damages of over a million and a half of dollars were brought by British subjects before the British Claims Commission for cotton destroyed during the destruction of Columbia.

It was then the facts were officially

the city, advanced thru its streets and raised their colors over the State House in advance of all other troops, and had reported stragglers of the rebel army pillaging stores and firing the cotton which was piled along the main street. I had treated the exploit informally, but the actors, if living, will now come forward as the most important witnesses for the Government, because members of that party had entered the main street of the city three-quarters of an hour before the advance skirmishers of Col. Stone's Brigade of the Fifteenth

Corps." (See Gen. Sherman's letter, Sept. 12, 1873, in the Washington Daily Chronicle, Sept. 15, 1873.

### Who Fired the Cotton.

Gen. Belknap, our brigade commander, was Secretary of War at the time, and furnished Gen. Sherman with the names of the officers of the party. The officers were Lieut.-Col. J. C. Kennedy, 13th Iowa, and Maj. Wm. H. Goodrell and myself, of the 15th Iowa, both members of Belknap's staff at the time. Each was directed to execute his separate affidavit setting forth the facts, and all of us were communicated with by the Secretary of War Aug. 22, 1873, and to hold himself in readiness to appear in Washington before the British Claims Commission. Our affidavits were regarded so conclusive that they were deemed sufficient to establish the fact that the cotton destroyed at Columbia was fired by stragglers from the rebel army, and the decision was rendered in favor of the Government.

Thus our early, sudden and successful dash for the State House that eventful morning saved to Uncle Sam a vast amount of money. Neither Col. Stone nor any of his brigade nor any of the Fifteenth Corps were called on for evidence. They were not aware of any of these facts, all of which occurred before their entrance into the city, but did occur while four Crocker Brigade men were rushing along Main street that morning. We were eyewitnesses.

For many years after 1873 no attempt was made to deprive the 13th Iowa flag the well-merited honor of being placed first over the State House.

Thursday, Feb. 16, 1865, Crocker's Brigade, the 11th, 13th, 15th and 16th Iowa, Fourth Division, Seventeenth Corps, went into camp on the west bank of the Congaree River, opposite the city. Gen. Belknap and his staff were viewing the city from the top of the bluff when Gen. Sherman and his staff rode up. After taking a survey of the city thru his field glass, Sherman turned to Belknap and said: "General, it will be a great honor to the men who first enter the city and unfurl the Stars and Stripes on that historic old State House." In the old State House Building was where the first ordinance of secession was passed. I was near, and heard Gen. Sherman's remark. I turned to Maj. Goodrell, also of the staff, and said: "Let us make an effort to cross the river." He enthusiastically agreed. Belknap granted permission. Lieut.-Col. Kennedy, a brave and daring young officer, in command of the 13th Iowa, with a squad of his regiment, volunteered to accompany us.

### Cross Over in a Leaky Boat.

The bridge, about half a mile below, had been destroyed by the Confeder-

ates, but we found an old, rickety, leaky flat ferryboat. We labored all of that afternoon and late into the night repairing, calking leaks, making oars, etc. The negroes were of great assistance to us. They were greatly astonished that we would attempt the crossing in that old boat, declaring it would not hold together half-way across that rough and swift river. The rebel pickets on the opposite side of the river were firing on us, and our pickets returning the fire vigorously. Three of our men were wounded on the 16th and one killed and one wounded on the 17th. About 9 a. m., Friday morning, Feb. 17, 1865, all was ready.

We divested ourselves of shoes and outer garments, with instructions to jump into the river if the firing got too hot, endeavor to keep the boat between ourselves and the enemy, and drift, if possible, back to the west bank. Every one not at the oars had a gun with supply of ammunition, each keenly watching the other shore, ready for action. When the word was given to "cut loose" we numbered 24, including the three officers.

As the boat swung out into the stream three of our number jumped into the water and waded back. This left our number 21 all told. We pulled for a small island near the other shore, reaching it without much difficulty. Some of us crawled up thru the willows, but could see no one. We knew the Fifteenth Corps was to come down from the north after crossing the Saluda and Broad Rivers, which form the Congaree a short distance above Columbia.

We returned to the boat, donned our clothing, pulled boldly and rapidly around the point of the island to the shore, and rushed up the embankment. To our delight we found the rebel pickets had been withdrawn; we could see them about a quarter of a mile down the river, marching away. We landed at the foot of a street running east and west near an old mill. Arranging with negroes to return with the boat for more troops, we started immediately for the State House.

### Impress a Horse and Buggy.

At a cross street we intercepted a man in a buggy rushing south, evidently intending to escape the Fifteenth Corps, little expecting to meet us. It took but a moment to convince the owner that we needed the rig worse than he did, dumping him and his effects into the street, Maj. Goodrell and the color bearer with the flag banner and a gun jumped into the buggy. Col. Kennedy and I sat on the crossbar over the back spring, and literally "hung on." Directing the others of our party to follow, Goodrell put whip to the horse. Within two blocks of the State House, in a side street half block

ahead, I discovered a squad of Confederate cavalymen formed in line ready to fire. I shouted, "Look out!" to Goodrell, but before he could stop the horse we had covered the half block and reached the cross street where the cavalry had been. They had overshoot us, and were galloping away frantically. I sprang to the ground, snatched the gun from the buggy and fired. One of the riders fell on the edge of the sidewalk, and his body lay there most of the day.

At this time we four men were about half a mile from the balance of our party, the nearest Union troops, and surrounded by enemies.

The Mayor was at that time, as we learned later in the day, out making a formal surrender of the city to Col. Stone, of the Fifteenth Corps. The rebel soldiers and citizens who witnessed our approach undoubtedly knew the city was being formally surrendered, and supposed the Union army were at our heels. Had the facts been known to them they could, and certainly would, have overwhelmed and perhaps killed us four and captured our flags.

Immediately after the firing ceased many citizens came out of a hotel. One had a pitcher of brandy, and asked us to drink. We declined. The color bearer reloaded the gun, and, with our revolvers drawn, told them to "stand back."

Very soon the negroes came rushing up, shouting: "Bres de Lo'd, de Yankees nab come." I told one to run fast, meet the squad and say the flag had been fired upon and to come double-quick. We remained in our isolated and rather perilous position until the rest of our party came up. On their arrival we advanced to the Capitol Buildings. We found two. The first was brick, not finished; walls were finished up to the square; doors not hung; no floors laid; no sash in window frames; no roof; no plastering; a mere skeleton and work seemingly abandoned months before. Maj. Goodrell took the banner of the 13th Iowa, and unfurled it from the top walls of that building. Col. Kennedy, the color bearer, with the flag, and myself crossed the street a little farther south, not over 200 feet away, to the old frame State House, ran up the outside steps and began forcing the doors open. The sexton came hurriedly with the keys, unlocked the doors, directed the way to the garret and to the top of the building. I distinctly call to mind how terribly dark and musty it was up in that old garret. We could not see our hands before us. I succeeded in finding a piece of scantling and knocked off a piece of siding to admit light. Then we all made a break for the ladder, and soon were on top and the flag flying.

### Location of the Fifteenth Corps.

At this juncture we could see the deployed skirmishers of the Fifteenth Corps about a mile and a half north. In a few minutes the skirmishers rallied; then we felt much easier. Almost immediately our battery west of the river began a rapid fire. Then the Fifteenth Corps skirmishers deployed again on the double-quick. Imagine our anxiety. We feared the enemy had passed between us and the river. If so, a battle would be fought, and possibly death or capture would be our portion. A few minutes seemed like hours. Our battery ceased firing, and it dawned upon us that the firing was a salute to the success of our undertaking.

Gen. Belknap and hundreds on the west bank of the river were anxiously watching for the appearance of the flag, and when Old Glory appeared the order to fire a salute was given. When the firing began Col. Stone, of the Fifteenth Corps, who was then receiving the surrender of the city, did not understand it any more than we did. It was at this time, to which the 30th Iowa comrades refer, when Col. Stone drew his revolver and informed the Mayor, in words with fire attached, if he proved treacherous his life would pay the penalty. The Mayor fell on his knees, calling God to witness his sincerity and honesty in surrendering the city; that he had no knowledge whatever of the cause of the firing. Maj. R. D. Cramer, 30th Iowa, who had command of the skirmish line, was present, and heard what was said. He has often told me about it and of their great surprise and anxiety when the battery opened fire.

At this point I desire to call attention to the fact that at the identical time when the firing of our battery began and the city was being formally surrendered to Col. Stone, the little squad of Crocker's Iowa Brigade, Seventeenth Corps, had already taken forcible possession of the city, and were on the old and new State Buildings, with the 13th Iowa flag and banner unfurled, while the advance skirmishers of Stone's Brigade were one and a half miles north of us.

Shortly after the firing we were overjoyed to see our troops marching toward the city. Col. Kennedy directed our color bearer to remain with the colors, after which he and I went below. In a short time thereafter, while standing in the rotunda and facing the outside door, the first person we saw enter was a Lieutenant rushing into the building with a flag. He was from the 9th Iowa, and inquired the way to the roof. I asked him what he wanted to do. "Place my flag on this building," he answered. I took out my watch and said: "Lieutenant, we have had our flag

flying there three-quarters of an hour." In great amazement he said: "The — you have." I explained how we had crossed the river. "Well, it is all right, so Iowa gets the honor," he said. I have always regretted not getting his name. If he is living, I would like to hear from him.

### The 30th Iowa Removes the Flag.

I now come to an unexpected movement on the Columbia trestle board, wherein Comrade Van Norstrand's 30th Iowa becomes very conspicuous. After Col. Kennedy and I had left the top of the building our color bearer concluded to get a relic of some kind from that old building. Securely fastening his flagstaff, thinking, of course, all would be safe, as we were now surrounded by our friends, he went down to the Hall of Representatives to see what he could find. On his return his flag was missing, and two soldiers of the 30th Iowa had their flag unfurled. Col. Stone's Brigade, the 30th Iowa in it, had, about noon, taken formal possession of the city. They declared and insisted that no flag was found on the building when they appeared on the roof.

We were not at that time able to find any trace of our flag or staff. I assure you we were not in a very amiable frame of mind about it. When the brigade came over in the evening they would have come pretty near whipping their weight in wildcats, had it been necessary, to have secured our flag. We did not see that flag again until near Cheraw, S. C., two weeks afterwards. On March 3 our brigade had gone into camp near Cheraw. Other troops were passing. Some of the 13th Iowa strolled down, and some member of a passing regiment asked him what regiment was camped there. "13th Iowa," was the answer. "Wonder if they would like to have their flag again?" "Yes, we would," answered the comrade eagerly. "What regiment is this?" "30th Iowa."

Several of the 13th Iowa followed the 30th into camp, found their flag secreted with one of the companies, secured and returned it to the regiment amid great rejoicing. Each reader may figure out for himself how it was possible for Stone's Brigade to have planted their flag on the State House first, our flag being on the building when our battery opened fire; the 30th Iowa flag was a mile and a half north.

Had they destroyed our flag and not acknowledged the fact, it would have been more difficult for us to have satisfied others that our claim was true. But

such brave and loyal Iowa boys could do no damage to Old Glory; they loved it as truly as we did; they preserved it to return to us. Our finding them "with the goods," however, was proof positive that our flag was flying over the State House, and found by them when they first appeared on the building.

If those two comrades who found the 13th Iowa flag on the building unguarded, took it down, took the flag from the staff, threw the staff down in that dark garret, secreted the flag and carried it away with them, as they explained when the flag was returned, will now come forward and tell us all about it, all will enjoy the narration. We have forgiven you, boys, years and years ago.

### Saw the Cotton Burners.

As we dashed down Main street that eventful morning we passed in the middle of each block large piles of baled cotton. Confederate soldiers were pouring turpentine on the cotton and setting fire to it. Many stragglers of the rebel army were pillaging stores. During the day attempts were made to extinguish the fire in the cotton, but in the evening, when the wind came up, the smouldering flame in the cotton was fanned into a blaze again, which was soon communicated to the frame buildings and all destroyed. Gen. Belknap and staff were in the saddle nearly all night, rendering aid where possible.

There is one important feature about this Columbia achievement never given the consideration deserved. The result of that exploit, and that alone, secured the necessary evidence which saved the Government not only \$1,500,000, but refuted the dastardly charge made by the Confederates that Sherman's army pillaged and burned a city which had been surrendered in good faith. I met and indignantly denied this charge when visiting Columbia a few years ago. A Confederate Colonel had written a book, entitled "Burning of Columbia". I had read it, in which he charges us with burning the city and of a number of crimes. The State officers were anxious for me to meet him and talk over matters. I had no objection, but I did not meet him; he was out of the city. I learned, however, that he, at the time of our entering, was leaving the city with Hampton's army. I told them I was an eyewitness to the Confederate soldiers firing the cotton and pillaging stores, and it must be apparent to them that I knew more about it than he did.

