



Episode 712, Story 3: Civil War Bridge

Elyse: Our last story retraces Sherman's assault on the heart of the Confederacy. Winter, 1865: the final stages of General Sherman's bloody march through the south. On February 17th, the capitol city of Columbia, South Carolina lies squarely in the General's crosshairs. In a last-ditch effort to protect the vital railroad hub and the thousands of terrified refugees packing city streets, Confederate soldiers destroy the remaining bridge over the Broad river. The reprieve is temporary. In less than 12 hours Sherman's men will cross the river and bring destruction to the birthplace of the secessionist south. Nearly a century and a half after these dramatic events, David Brinkman of Columbia, South Carolina, believes a long-standing marker commemorating this history has missed the mark.

David: Sometimes history is in your own backyard.

Elyse: Hi!

David: Hi Elyse.

Elyse: How are you?

David: Doin' good.

Elyse: It's kind of, uh, wet out today, huh.

David: Yeah it is but I think we can still show you some things that I have here.



Elyse: Oh good, wow, what a pretty river! Nice view. What do you have to show me?

David: If you look to the left you'll see the current day Broad River Bridge.

Elyse: Right. David believes that somewhere in the location of the current bridge lie the remains of the bridge Confederate soldiers burned to save Columbia from General Sherman. He explains how the Yankee soldiers had quickly built a temporary floating "pontoon" bridge to attack the city.

David: On today's bridge there's a historical marker and it says, "The first bridge burned in 1865 to delay Sherman's army which crossed on pontoon bridges".

Elyse: The current marker claims that Sherman's men had built their temporary bridge downstream of the current structure. Right, I see.

David: I believe that's wrong. I believe the crossing actually occurred upstream of the marker.

Elyse: David's first clue that Sherman's historic crossing occurred upstream were some curious rocks in the river with protruding hooks. He believes these were once part of the destroyed confederate bridge. The second clue arrived in 2005.

David: This is a newspaper article that was printing out on the anniversary of the burning of Columbia. And it has an illustration in it that was made by an artist traveling with Sherman.



Elyse: The illustration also shows the pontoon bridge upstream from the burned bridge.

Sherman's assault on Columbia deeply scarred the city. David simply wants the history told accurately.

David: I want to set the record straight that the historical marker is wrong and that both bridges were upstream of that location not downstream.

Elyse: Ok, well I'm gonna have to take, if you don't mind, some of this information with me. The rain has finally let up: I find the historic marker in question. It reads, "first bridge burned 1865 to delay Sherman's army which crossed on pontoon bridges downstream." I can see a couple hooks coming out of some of the rocks on here. The rocks are upstream of the current bridge. Also upstream, I find a road which David believes Sherman's soldiers used to reach the river's edge, and build their pontoon bridge. It looks like someone came in with a bulldozer and made this road. And I doubt that I'm going to find any evidence from the 1800s. As Sherman's soldiers approached Columbia, the panic that had been building now reached a crescendo. This is from a Confederate soldier's diary. "This has been an anxious week for us all. The enemy, swearing vengeance against South Carolina, the cradle of a secession...is approaching step by step." More markers in downtown Columbia chronicle what happened after Sherman crossed the river. He led thirty-five thousand men into the heart of the South Carolina capitol. The bronze stars on the granite exterior mark the scars of artillery damage. Union troops burned the old state house, shelled this unfinished building and raised the United States flag above it." The fire that destroyed Columbia was described by one commentator of the period as "the most monstrous barbarity of the barbarous march". Sherman denied ordering the burning of the city. But he later conceded some Union soldiers may have helped stoke fires of cotton bales set ablaze by retreating rebel soldiers. And his men, the General added, had almost certainly enjoyed the destruction of the



capital of the state where the rebellion had started. Now I'm more curious, how and where did Sherman get the troops across the river to wreak havoc on this city? I'm headed to the South Carolina confederate relic room and military museum. Curator Joe long describes how a sudden change in Sherman's direction had surprised the city.

Joe: It was believed that Charleston was Sherman's next target so a lot of folks attempting to move out of Sherman's path moved right into his path.

Elyse: After seizing the port city of Savanna just before Christmas, Sherman had wheeled north, driving Confederate soldiers and civilians before him.

Joe: February of 1865, uh, the town really was near panic. The place had been swollen by refugees.

Elyse: Those refugees had given horrifying accounts of the behavior of the advancing union troops.

Joe: They would show up at your farm, burn the barn; shoot the family dog and move on. The terror was very real.

Elyse: Sherman's decision to avoid the port city of Charleston, and strike the less-well defended railroad hub in Columbia took the city by surprise. How much warning did they have?



Joe: For the average citizen in Columbia, they really realized that Sherman's army was on the way when they could actually hear the cannons firing at the skirmish of Congaree Creek about five miles away.

Elyse: Joe uses a union drawn map to illustrate how the retreating confederate soldiers destroyed the bridges into Columbia until only one remained. Now the only thing standing in the way of Sherman getting into Columbia is the Broad River Bridge.

Joe: That's right. And at that wooden bridge a young Confederate General Wheeler has stationed a detail of about 30 men and their cannons are the last thing in between an entire wing about 35,000 men of Sherman's army and the terrified city. A lot of folks are trying to get out of town, in a hurry. There's pandemonium at the rail station.

Elyse: The Confederates soaked the bridge with tar and waited.

Joe: It's been left intact so that the very last Confederate defenders can get across it.

Elyse: Sounds pretty intense. I show Joe our disputed marker. He has the written account from the captain charged with destroying the remaining bridge. "I threw up my hat to the boys at the guns to open fire, and applied my torch. I don't suppose anybody ever saw timber flying in a more approved style. In three minutes the near end was on fire. The destruction of the bridge was complete." There is no accounting of where exactly the bridge had been. Wherever it had once crossed, Joe says General Sherman was well prepared for the bridges destruction.



Joe: This was the time for him to call on his vaunted Engineer Corps. It was a very fast moving force, it lived off the countryside. But one of the few things he prioritized to carry in his wagon train were the pontoons which are these boat like items that were used to build a bridge in a hurry.

Elyse: In 12 hours, the Union had erected the temporary floating bridge and begun their sacking of the city. But where exactly had they crossed? In the official war records published by the US government in the late 1800's, Joe has turned up an account of the river crossing by a Union colonel, George Stone. He was in command of protecting engineers constructing the pontoon bridge.

Joe: The point of crossing designated was about half a mile above the wreck of the bridge.

Elyse: That's interesting. Our illustration does show the pontoon "above" or upstream from the wrecked bridge. But the artist may have taken some liberties. The distance to the wrecked bridge doesn't look like half a mile. Does it give us any clues as to where the bridge is?

Joe: The Department of Archives and History is in charge of those markers. They would have done the research for it. So you can find out from them how they decided to place it where it is.

Elyse: Dr. Tracy power is head of the South Carolina Historical Marker Program.

Tracy: This marker was one of 50 erected by the Columbia Sesquicentennial Commission of 1936, celebrating the 150th anniversary of the City of Columbia. I've pulled the files for Richland County for that period, and let's see what we come up with.



Elyse: Ah, there it is. Ok, so now what do we do?

Tracy: Broad River Bridge. This is our suggested inscription which is actually a draft because there are dates missing.

Elyse: Broad River Bridge, burned on approach of General Sherman, present bridge erected in...again there's another space...so this seems pretty incomplete to me.

Tracy: It is.

Elyse: And it doesn't say anything about the bridges being downstream.

Tracy: No it doesn't.

Elyse: So why isn't this what it says on here? The documents don't account for the wording on the marker, but Tracy says when it was erected local historians would have had some unique resources to call on.

Tracy: Sherman's trek through and burning of Columbia in 1865 was a very dramatic event in the history of the city. In 1938 there were people living who would have remembered that.

Elyse: He says these eyewitnesses could have determined the markers inscription. Do you think the marker is correct?



Tracy: In the absence of any other information in this file to tell me otherwise, I think it probably is. I think the marker's correct.

Elyse: Tracy suggests I meet with state archivist Patrick McCawley. He's been researching state records for me, and has made a discovery.

Patrick: That's your bridge that you're looking for as it looked like in 1839.

Elyse: This is the bridge that the Confederates destroyed.

Patrick: This is the only known depiction I've seen of the bridge.

Elyse: Can we tell where this is in regards to where the bridge is today?

Patrick: The problem we have is that there aren't many markers here that we can use on a modern day map; you can see one of the corners of the property is a sycamore tree.

Elyse: Right

Patrick: 1839 Sycamore Tree probably is not standing these days.

Elyse: Right. But Patrick has a recently uncovered map which he thinks may be able to help us.

Patrick: This is an 1870 survey done of the Columbia canal. Goes all the way to downtown Columbia.



Elyse: Wow!

Patrick: And the area that we're looking at is right up here. Here you have the Broad river road and then coming across you have the Broad River Bridge.

Elyse: He explains how the bridge the Confederates had destroyed was rebuilt soon after.

Patrick: We know that the 1865 burned bridge was built on stone piers and that they probably would have used the same piers to rebuild.

Elyse: To find out whether this historic survey matches today's landscape, we superimpose it over a modern aerial photograph. Everything in red is from the 1870 survey?

Patrick: Right. The city blocks continuing to line up, the canal matching up pretty well. Then we get up further and we have the modern day bridge and slightly above it a little bit north and up river about 100 to 150 feet. We have the bridge from the 1870 survey.

Elyse: So David's first hunch was correct. The foundation stones in the river are almost certainly from the bridge the Confederates destroyed. And Patrick has found something else.

Patrick: A little further north is the Old Ferry road coming in from the east side and crossing the river.



Elyse: Just upstream from the destroyed bridge is the same road David believed Sherman used to bring his troops to the river's edge.

Patrick: I think at this point what you probably need to do is do some archaeological work to see if you can find the old road beds.

Elyse: State Archaeologist Jon Leader meets me at the river bank. He believes we can use modern technology to help determine if Sherman's army came through here, almost a century and a half ago.

Jon: This is a Bartington gradiometer. Gradiometers check the magnetics of the earth. Every spot on the earth is magnetic and if you get a lot of people going through the area like Sherman did with 30,000 men, horses, equipment, it's going to shift the magnetics of the area a little bit, we hope.

Elyse: I'm beeping a lot.

Jon: Yes, that means it's testing, four times per beep.

Elyse: We run the gradiometer's powerful magnets back and forth over a large section, including the land that lines up with the destroyed bridge. Jon downloads the data and explains our findings.

Jon: These two lines here with this little bit in front of it, these are cart tracks. This is where the people came up in their horse drawn carts and went onto the bridge to go across. The bridge is



now burned and gone, but this remains. The Confederates, Yankees, everybody's walked right here, right now!

Elyse: But was Sherman's pontoon bridge also constructed upstream of the present bridge? Jon and I take the gradiometer to the river's edge. After going over the ground several times, Jon believes he's found evidence of Union troops readying their attack on Columbia.

Jon: And right here in the center you've got a whole bunch of carts. You've got one here you've got one there. They're going right across.

Elyse: How do you know that all those marks are from Sherman, I mean it was a ferry crossing; couldn't it just be regular traffic? What Jon tells me next will certainly be of interest to David.

David, you asked if this marker was correct. And I have to tell you it sent me on a pretty incredible journey. I show David the surviving image of the original bridge and explain how a photographic overlay had confirmed it's position exactly where the old foundations lie today. Where is it? It's upstream.

David. Wow. How 'bout that, yeah? That's amazing.

Elyse: Pretty cool, right? And I have another surprise for David. New technology had turned up evidence of a very old traffic jam.

Jon: What you're looking at here is a series of cart trails. You can see them parallel lines. This isn't the type of thing you'd normally see with just everyday traffic. What this says is you've got Sherman coming through with a tremendous number of men and carts and cannon and material



and they can't get across a pontoon bridge all at the same time. They have to take their time to go across so it's hurry up and wait.

Elyse: So we found Sherman's pontoon bridge?

Jon: You got it, you've found it. Between the History Detectives and David you've rewritten history. Congratulations. That's tremendous.

Elyse: You were correct. Sherman's pontoon bridge and the Confederate bridge were upstream not downstream.

David: Spent about four years trying to find this, couldn't really nail it down. Looks like you've done it.

Elyse: The marker is wrong. You were correct. And that means a lot to you?

David: Yeah, it means a lot to me.

Elyse: I have one more thing for you. This is the South Carolina Historical Marker application. And I think you need to apply for a new marker.

David: Ok great, I will do that.

Elyse: Kudos to you. And thank you for bringing it our attention. On May 10th, 2009, David received an award from the office of the South Carolina State Archeologist for his help in



identifying the location of the burned Confederate bridge and the Union army's pontoon crossing. David has submitted an application for a new historical marker. Although Sherman argued that Columbia's destruction speeded the war's end, the taking of Atlanta 5 months earlier had all but sealed the north's victory. Just two months after Columbia burned, on April 9th, Confederate commander Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox courthouse in Northern Virginia.