

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

The invasion of Pennsylvania

As the Russian Army pummels more and more Ukrainian cities into rubble, it's worth remembering that cities have arisen from the ashes of war in times past, such as London, Rotterdam, Hamburg, and Berlin.

Even Pennsylvania has a town that was burned to the ground by the enemy and rebuilt — Chambersburg.



Commentary by
Tom Hylton

The Civil War's most bloody battle was fought in and around Gettysburg in July 1863, when Robert E. Lee's invading Army of Northern Virginia was turned away by northern forces. Despite more than 50,000 casualties in the battle, the town of Gettysburg escaped intact. Lee had reminded his troops "we make war only upon armed men" and prohibited "unnecessary or wanton injury to private property."

Lee retreated to Virginia.

By the summer of 1864, Confederate armies were in retreat all over the South. In the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, Confederate guerillas were ambushing wagon trains and assassinating Union soldiers at night. In retaliation, the Union army burned down the Virginia Military Institute in Lexington and the houses of suspected southern sympathizers.

The Confederates decided further escalation was necessary. About 2,500 men marched to Chambersburg, just 20 miles north of the Maryland border. It was undefended.

The Confederate commanding general, John McCausland, issued a proclamation that he would order his

troops to burn down the town if town fathers did not provide a ransom of \$100,000 in gold within six hours.

Meanwhile, individual soldiers began looting stores and homes and robbing citizens on the street.

When the ransom was not produced, McCausland ordered Colonel William Peters to arm his men with torches and set fire to the town.

Peters refused, saying he would "break his sword and throw it away" rather than burn down the houses of innocent women and children.

Peters was arrested for insubordination and ordered to collect his regiment and withdraw from the town.

Other soldiers set fire to the courthouse and town hall and downtown buildings. Squads of Confederates went from house to house, stealing everything of value and setting fire to the bedding and furniture.

One Confederate officer wrote, "Terror was depicted in every face, women, refined ladies and girls running through the streets wild with fright seeking some place of safety."

About 500 buildings were burned, including 274 houses. The Confederates withdrew to Virginia before Union troops arrived.

Charges were dropped against Col. Peters, who survived the war to teach Latin at the University of Virginia.

Chambersburg was quickly rebuilt. By 1900, the town had 9,000 residents, twice its pre-war population.

Every July, the county visitors bureau holds a re-enactment of the fire as part of its Old Market Day.

Let's hope Ukraine's cities will also survive the current war, arise from the ashes, and prosper.



CHAMBERSBURG, PENNSYLVANIA LAY IN RUINS on July 30, 1864, after Confederate soldiers set fire to the town. About 500 buildings were burned down. "About every crime in the catalogue of infamy was committed."