

“SMOKE AND FLAME”: VIRGINIA, AUGUST 1864

*Mathella Page Harrison:
Diary, August 17, 1864*

The Union defeat at Kernstown, Virginia, on July 24 and the burning of Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, by Jubal Early's cavalry on July 30 led Lincoln and Grant to reorganize the forces opposing Early in the Shenandoah Valley. Major General Philip H. Sheridan, the commander of the Army of the Potomac's Cavalry Corps, took command of the new Army of the Shenandoah on August 7 and began advancing south from Harpers Ferry three days later. When his cavalry encountered infantry reinforcements from Lee's army near Front Royal on August 16, Sheridan decided to withdraw to the north and guard the Potomac River crossings. From her farm in Millwood, Mathella Page Harrison watched as Union soldiers carried out Grant's orders to confiscate or destroy the Valley's provisions, forage, and livestock.

Wednesday, August 17th—Night has closed at last on this day of horrors. Years almost seem to have rolled since I opened my eyes this morning. The first sound that greeted my ears was the rumbling of Yankee waggons passing onward with their troops to swell the hosts of those who passed last week and who were assembled in and around Winchester waiting for Early's return. At nine o'clock Yankee pickets were stationed in every hill. Fires of barns, stockyards etc. soon burst forth and by eleven, from a high elevation, fifty could be seen blazing forth. The whole country was enveloped with smoke and flame. The sky was lurid and but for the green trees one might have decided the shades of Hades had descended suddenly. The shouts, ribald jokes, awful oaths, demoniacal laughter of the fiends added to the horrors of the day. They demanded feed when they had just applied the torch to the provisions of the year, and indeed years, for now the seed which would have been sown has been destroyed. In almost every instance every head of stock was driven off. Those young animals that refused to go were shot down. Near a farm where eight fires were

blazing, Custer and his staff sat exulting over the ruin they had wrought. Large families of children were left without one cow. In many of the barns were stowed in and around carriages, all kinds of farming implements, waggon, plows etc., and in no instance did they allow anything to be saved. The loss is inestimable and unpardonable in these times, situated as we are, communications with our lines so difficult, and no trade with the enemy even if we wished it. Hay, oats and straw were burnt with the wheat. I cannot imagine what the poor cattle are to live on this winter. Owing to the great drought the field grass burnt like tinder. About half of the county was in flames. Some of the dwellings were sacked, clothing, provisions, male and female taken indiscriminately. Remember Chambersburg was their watch word. Thoroughly did they enjoy their days work. When one fire was at its hottest, the dwelling in peril of being added to the number, one turned to the other, "Haven't we had a nice day?" Retaliation may be glorious for the interior of Dixie but to those in this poor debatable land its fires are almost beyond endurance.