

Throughout the night of the 17th and on the 18th, Confederate forces evacuated the city of Charleston. General McLaws obeyed Beauregard's orders to concentrate the Confederate forces at St. Stephens on the Northeastern Railroad in Williamsburg District. The part of Wright's division in St. Paul's Parish was ordered to move by railroad to Monk's Corner and then to march by Sandy Run to the Santee River. The remainder of Wright's division was to move by Summerville to St. Stephens. The troops in Christ Church Parish were to go by steamer to St. Stephens. The troops from James Island were ordered to move by Ashley's Ferry and follow the Northeastern Railroad to St. Stephens. McLaws was to withdraw his troops from Sherman's front at Branchville and continue on to St. Stephens. Finally, all remaining troops in the city of Charleston were to be evacuated by way of the Northeast Railroad to the Santee River crossing at St. Stephens.³¹

It was during the last phase of the evacuation that a terrible tragedy befell the civilian population. Lieutenant Moses Wood, commanding Company F of the 15th South Carolina, was in Charleston in charge of a work detail that was loading the remaining Confederate supplies on to cars of the Northeastern Railroad. Wood reported,

We had not been out of the depot long before the women and children rushed in to see what they could get. The depot was filled with powder and explosives and caught on fire and was blown up—causing the most pitiful sight I saw during the war. Women and children, about 250, were killed and wounded, and some were carried out by where [we] were in line on the streets, with their clothing burned off and badly mutilated.³²

In an article describing the aftermath of the Confederate evacuation of Charleston on February 18, The *Fayetteville Telegraph* reported that Charleston was “but little more than a heap of ruins.” A terrible fire had burned the city from two sources, the Northeastern Railroad Depot explosion described by Lieutenant Wood and the Savannah Bridge over the Ashley River. Around midnight on the 18th, the city of Charleston was initially occupied by a Federal force of about five hundred soldiers who had come over from the surrounding islands in small boats.³³

On February 19, General Hardee reported from Kingstree that “Charleston was successfully evacuated Friday night and Saturday morning.” Although some of Hardee's troops had been able to ride the cars out of Charleston, many of them had to march the forty miles to St. Stephen's. The exhausted and footsore soldiers, many of whom were garrison troops unused to marching long distances, began arriving the next day. Lieutenant Colonel Thomas B. Roy, General Hardee's adjutant, noted that there were “a great many desertions from the command on the march from



The Northeastern Railroad depot in Charleston after the explosion that killed hundreds of women and children. (10)

Charleston. Some artillery companies were decimated by desertions.” Lee hoped Hardee’s corps could make a junction with the Army of Tennessee in front of Sherman at Chester or, if that was not possible, could continue on to Chesterfield or Cheraw.³⁴

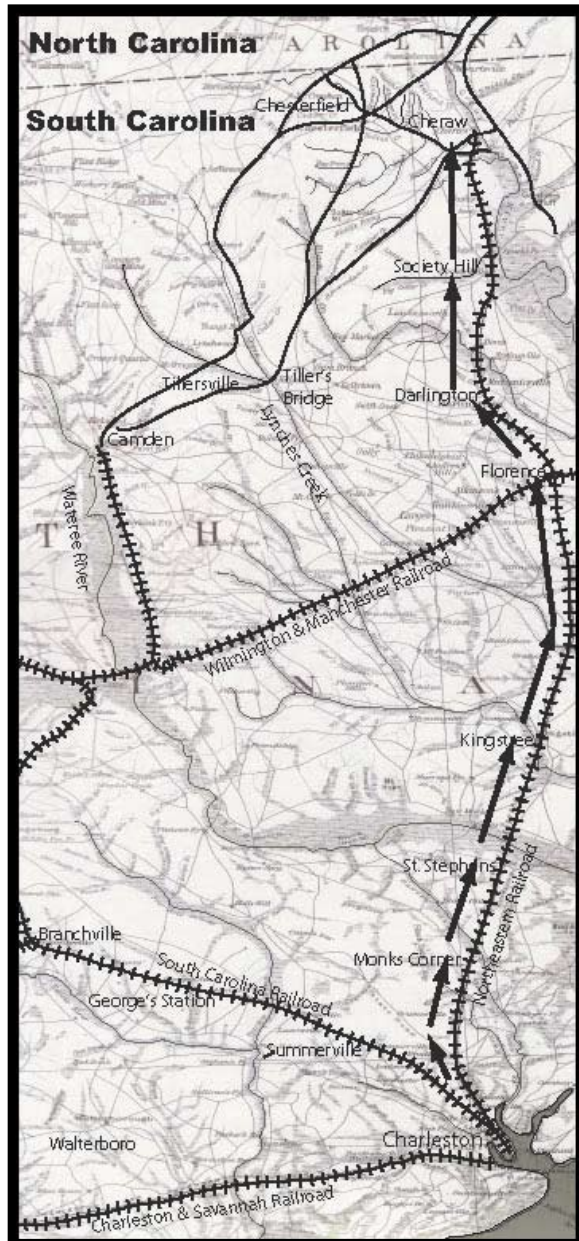
The first trainload of troops from McLaws’ division arrived at Kingstree in Williamsburg District on the afternoon of February 21. As they neared their homes, the temptation to desert must have been especially great for the men of Company G—the Williamsburg Rifles—of the 15th South Carolina, especially since Sherman might well pay a visit to their neighborhood.³⁵

But the Confederates were not ready to give up. On February 2, 1865, shortly after General Robert E. Lee was named commander-in-chief of all Confederate armies by President Davis, General James Longstreet wrote Lee urging that

General Joseph E. Johnston once again be placed in command of the Army of Tennessee. Vice President Alexander Stephens and seventeen Confederate senators also petitioned Lee to restore Johnston. Longstreet's recommendation might have had the desired effect because Lee sent a dispatch to Johnston urging him "to concentrate all available forces and drive back Sherman." Beauregard remained as Johnston's second in command. General Joseph Eggleston Johnston was fifty-eight years old, and the army he now commanded was a shambles; his Federal counterpart, Major General William Tecumseh Sherman, was at the head of an army about which General Johnston had concluded, there "had been no other like [it] since the days of Julius Caesar."³⁶

On February 22, part of McLaws' command continued as far as Florence on the Northeastern Railroad. As usual, the Confederate troop trains were crowded to overflowing. Some of the men from Kershaw's brigade spent another miserable night riding on top of the cars in a cold, driving rain.³⁷

Part of McLaws' division continued on from Florence to Cheraw. Lee hoped that they would be joined there by troops of the Army of Tennessee marching across South Carolina. The 2nd, 15th, and 20th South Carolina



The 15th South Carolina helps load one of the last trains leaving Charleston on the night of 17–18, 1865. It takes the cars to St. Stephens, Kingstree, Florence, and Cheraw prior to retreating into North Carolina before Sherman's army. Map by author.

(1) (7) (31) (32)

regiments of Kershaw's brigade stayed behind in Florence under Colonel Hardy's command to guard the wagons and supplies at that city.³⁸

On February 25, Brigadier General Kennedy and Captain Charles R. Holmes of the 2nd South Carolina left Cheraw on a scouting expedition toward Camden. The Confederate officers traveled about twenty-seven miles from Cheraw on the Camden Road, as far as a Mr. King's home. Near Mr. King's, they found the Federals camped along the Cheraw and Darlington Road leading from Camden. People in the neighborhood reported that Union soldiers were in the vicinity in considerable force—both infantry and cavalry.

General Hardee also sent a party under the leadership of Brigadier General Albert G. Blanchard to reconnoiter the country toward Tiller's Bridge over Lynch's River. Blanchard returned on the evening of the 26th and reported that he and his party were captured just beyond Black Creek about twenty-five miles from Cheraw, but that he had managed to escape shortly afterward.³⁹

On February 26, Union Major General Oliver O. Howard ordered the XV Corps under Major General John A. Logan to cross Lynch's Creek at Tiller's Bridge and the XVII Army Corps under Major General F. P. Blair to cross at Young's Bridge (near the present US Highway 1 bridge). Their objective was to be in Cheraw by March 1. The Federals had to cope with Lynches Creek being some three-quarters of a mile wide due to flooding from recent heavy rains.⁴⁰

Brevet Major General C. R. Wood, commanding the 1st Division of the XV Corps near Tiller's Bridge, reported that a Confederate prisoner captured on the night of the 26th reported that "he left Lieutenant General Hardee's army yesterday morning at Florence, and that Hardee's army is now marching up the road between that point and Cheraw with the head of column, as the prisoner supposes, at Cheraw tonight . . . with the intention of uniting at Charlotte."⁴¹

By ten on the morning of the 26th, the weather had begun to clear. The advance party of Union troops captured about a hundred members of the South Carolina militia. The Southerners stated that they refused to cross the state line and were on their way home, but the Yankees assumed they were lying. Most of these militiamen were old, gray-headed, and infirm, ranging in age from fifty to sixty-five. There were a few small boys among them. All had to be paroled because Sherman had no "facilities to transport these old cripples and little children."⁴²

On February 26, General Hardee wrote to General Johnston from Cheraw telling him that his dispatches had been received and that his instructions would be carried out "as far as practicable." Hardee told Johnston that he thought the movements of the Federals indicated they were going to Darlington, Florence, or Cheraw. Hardee reported that all of McLaws' division had arrived at Cheraw, except a brigade left at Florence under Colonel Hardy to protect that place until the troops, wagons, and artillery had passed. That day, Kershaw's brigade reported 1,433 effectives present with the 2nd, 15th, and part of the 20th South Carolina still behind at Florence.⁴³