

Service and Sacrifice: The Kidnapping of the General

By: Mary Klei, Head Curator

The following account is the story of the daring attempt by a group of Ohio soldiers early in the Civil War to disrupt railroad traffic on the vital Western & Atlantic Railroad, which carried Confederate troops and materiel to Chattanooga, Tennessee, crossroads of rail lines essential to the southern war effort. At the time, April of 1862, the deed which was to become known as the Andrews Raid was published in the Atlanta press as “the most extraordinary and astounding adventure of the war.” William Pittenger, author of the most widely known contemporary book about the incident and himself a participant, declared that “no story of the war seems to have fixed itself so firmly in the popular imagination,” adding that it “shows what a handful of brave men could undertake.” Closely connected to the narrative of the raid itself is the involvement of three key figures in the action, two of whom have ties to Warren County, Ohio and the third hailing from Flemingsburg, Kentucky, not far south of Maysville.

In a developing country of far-flung borders like the United States in the second quarter of the 19th century, the advance of the railroads heralded the expansion of commerce and industry and brought about the shrinking of distance and time required for moving goods and people. By the 1850s arteries of iron tracks traversed every state east of the Mississippi River, and during the next decade American railroads were to surpass those of the rest of the world combined. Most track, some 30,000 miles, was located in the north and the west, principally Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin. These lines, running north and south from centers of industry, would ensure rapid delivery of men and supplies during the looming Civil War, for, as invaders, the Union armies depended heavily on rail transportation as they penetrated into the South. On the other hand, trunk or main lines in the South, which had only 1/9 the industrial capacity of the North, ran east and west from eastern seaboard ports of entry across the Carolinas, Georgia, Virginia, Tennessee, Alabama and Mississippi to the great river. The limitation on rail service in the South was to prove a serious handicap to the Confederacy in its urgent need to move fighting forces and supplies.

As the war gained momentum military leaders on both sides soon came to understand the importance of protecting their own rail depots and connecting lines and disabling or destroying those of the opposition. The railroads made possible the rapid deployment of troops to Harper's Ferry in 1859, putting down the insurrection there; and after the bombardment of Fort Sumter, trains quickly carried troops from Massachusetts to Washington.

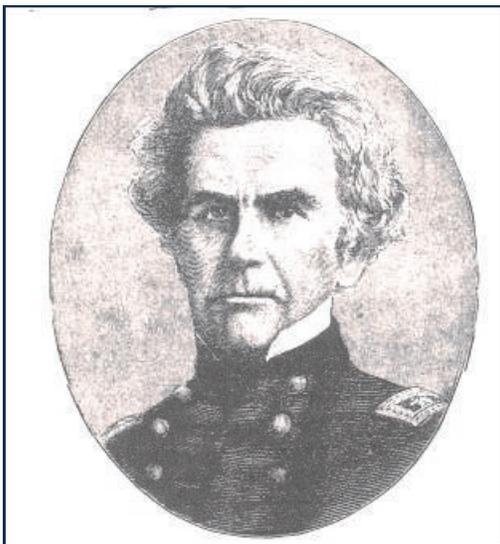
Not only did the South have significantly fewer miles of track, but also fewer locomotives and rail cars. Moreover, they were virtually incapable of increasing wartime production due to a dearth of heavy industry and raw

materials. Cannon, for example, were produced in only two main locations, at the Tredegar Iron Works in Richmond and in Selma, Alabama. Much of their rolling rail stock had come from New Jersey. The Confederacy's dependence on rail transport would become crucial, as the Union immediately blockaded ports and controlled rivers and other routes. It will be noted, therefore, that some great battles such as Chattanooga, Atlanta and ultimately, Petersburg were fought at important rail centers or junctions that were considered primary targets for immobilizing the South.

A major intersection of southern rail lines was Chattanooga, where a main trunk line from Richmond split west and south. Capturing this junction meant controlling southern transport of troops and supplies in both directions. Union seizure would cut off provisions, munitions, and reinforcements from Confederate forces in the east to those in the west. In Washington President Abraham Lincoln grew keenly aware of the strategic necessity for the Union takeover of the Chattanooga rail center, and formulated a plan for a troop movement from Cincinnati to eastern Tennessee designed to sever connections between Confederate forces in the east and their armies in the west, at Shiloh and Corinth. To complicate matters, however, eastern Tennessee had remained largely pro-Union. Throngs of Unionists left their farms and villages to fight in the Union army; others carried on a rebellion of their own at home against the Confederacy. It was men from this region who had earlier set out on a desperate campaign to cut Confederate rail lines between eastern battlefields and the South, including the Mississippi valley. They succeeded in burning bridges, bringing train traffic to a halt and throwing the area into a turmoil. Many of these civilians were captured and executed, causing a loud outcry in Washington demanding that troops be sent to the aid of East Tennesseans, but under the command of Generals Don Carlos Buell and George McClellan, this was not to be, for both Union commanders showed a decisive lack of action, rationalizing their procrastination and inertia with the excuse that they required more troops and materiel. Thus the Confederacy had ample time to prepare defenses and place obstacles in the Union's invasion route.

Enter a principal player in the ensuing drama. He was Brigadier General Ormsby MacKnight Mitchel, a Republican and abolitionist who openly criticized Buell's ineffectual leadership. By contrast, Mitchel was a man of decisiveness, efficiency and action. On March 18, 1862, Mitchel and his 10,000 men were ordered to march from Nashville into northern Alabama and occupy the Memphis & Charleston railroad, which ran east to the “lynchpin” intersection at Chattanooga. To Mitchel it was as though Buell had given him an independent command. Ormsby Mitchel was a Renaissance man of his day, excelling as professor, orator,

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engineer, railroad builder, astronomer and soldier. Born in 1809 in Union County, Kentucky, the boy lost his father at a young age, and his mother subsequently moved to Lebanon, Ohio, where the house they lived in still stands on East Silver Street. In Lebanon Ormsby

received his early education, reading prodigiously even in his childhood and displaying rare intelligence for one so young. He believed that he must contribute to his family's support and took employment as a store clerk and teamster, jobs that were far beneath his talents. At age 15 he received an appointment to West Point, made possible by a relative of his mother, the future Supreme Court Justice John McLean. Mitchel graduated in the class of 1829, ranking fifteenth, not far behind future generals Robert E. Lee and Joseph E. Johnston. Among his good friends at the Academy was Jefferson Davis, one day to become president of the Confederacy.

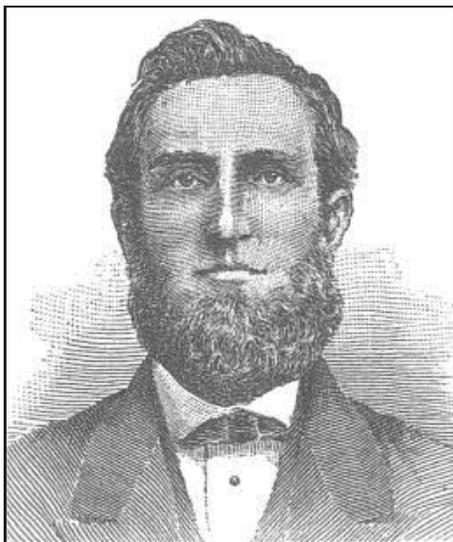
After graduation Mitchel stayed on as an instructor in mathematics and astronomy, and was soon married. He resigned from the army and studied law, opening an office in Cincinnati. Not long thereafter he became a professor of mathematics, philosophy and astronomy at the College of Cincinnati. Ormsby MacKnight Mitchel has been called the "engineering genius" behind the construction of two railroads, the Little Miami and the Ohio & Mississippi. He was active in the congregation of Dr. Lyman Beecher and led the local militia. Most of all Mitchel was "compellingly articulate on his favorite subject, astronomy, arousing enthusiasm throughout the nation." He established the Naval Observatory, the Harvard Observatory and the Cincinnati Observatory, inviting former President John Quincy Adams to conduct the dedication. As a result of his zeal in that field and from the respect and the many honors accruing to him from his discoveries and scholarly writings, Mitchel was widely and affectionately called "Old Stars." It is believed that Walt Whitman's poem "When I Heard The Learn'd Astronomer" is about attending a lecture given by "Old Stars."

But Ormsby Mitchel realized he lacked experience in one crucial area—as commander of troops in the field. He remedied that shortly after Bull Run, in July 1861, writing to President Lincoln who thereupon appointed him a brigadier general of volunteers. It is reported that "he believed in

practicing a 'hard war' against southern civilians, burning their crops, stealing their livestock and destroying their houses in hopes of bringing a speedy end to one of this country's bloodiest conflicts." In this, Mitchel is regarded as the predecessor of another Ohioan, General William Tecumseh Sherman, who adopted these tactics for the same reason when he marched his army through Georgia and the Carolinas in 1864. In the fall of 1861 General Mitchel designed and ordered built an eight-mile defensive line of rifle pits on northern Kentucky hilltops. Present-day Fort Mitchell (spelled with two Ls) was the most prominent of these fortifications. This, however, was not the dynamic Mitchel's idea of military accomplishment. No sooner did the "lethargic" Buell depart for points west, than Mitchel marched with 8,000 effective troops to Murfreesboro, Tennessee, stopping along the way to rebuild bridges and trestles destroyed by the enemy. His goal all this time was to take charge of the railroad to Chattanooga. Then further orders arrived from General Buell for Mitchel to proceed to Shelbyville as a point from which to launch military operations.

General Mitchel was now as good as detached from the main army, which would allow him to make a brilliant surprise march on Huntsville, Alabama, west of Chattanooga, as the first step toward taking possession of Chattanooga, Knoxville and East Tennessee, all of inestimable value to the Union. By his very nature, he was intolerant of delay, inefficiency or indecision (qualities he attributed to Buell). He had in mind a "dangerous and desperate enterprise" that would enable him to capture and isolate Chattanooga immediately with his own available troops. His plan was to burn the bridges south of Chattanooga, cutting it off from its southern and eastern rail connections. As this area was a hotbed of loyalty to the Old Flag, capable of providing a potential 50,000 Federal troops, there were no Confederate troops within 100 miles in all directions. The big rail bridge over Chickamauga Creek would be destroyed, and his army would occupy Chattanooga by Sunday night, April 13, 1862. Having thus secured Chattanooga, he would have adequate time to receive reinforcements from Washington. William Pittenger, mentioned earlier as a chronicler of the events that followed, credited Mitchel with having the best division in the western army, "made such by his own tireless efforts....He was loved and trusted by his men, who served with the assurance that he would succeed in any plan he undertook."

Later, however, Mitchel's career faltered after the Andrews Raid. Continued controversy with Generals Buell and now Halleck prompted his request for reassignment, which came about as an order to report to Hilton Head, South Carolina to assume command of the Department of the South. Mitchel built a town there for the local black population, slaves left behind when their owners fled the area. It was a model for future communities of this kind. The town was called Mitchelville; it was self-governed by the residents, as historian Russell Bonds has written. A marker today locates where the now-vanished town stood. Ormsby Mitchel died of yellow fever at Hilton Head on October 30, 1862. The steamer that carried his body to be buried in Greenwood



James J. Andrews

Cemetery in Brooklyn, New York coincidentally also had as passengers two former raiders, who eulogized Mitchel in their memoirs.

Now, on this Sunday night of April 6, 1862, just a year into the Civil War, a tall civilian of respectable mien appeared at Mitchel's headquarters tent near Shelbyville, Tennessee and introduced himself as James J. Andrews of

Flemingsburg, Kentucky, where he had lived since 1859. Born in Hancock County, Virginia in 1829, Andrews' background remains obscure; information about his youth and education is lost. He worked in Flemingsburg at house-painting and giving music lessons, as he was gifted with a fine singing voice. He was said to be a kindly, somewhat quiet man, favored by young ladies because of his good looks. Notwithstanding his popularity, he became engaged to Miss Elizabeth Layton and the couple decided to marry the following June (1862). He had spent much of his time on the road, so to speak, smuggling badly needed quinine into the Confederacy and returning to the North with intelligence, all the while representing himself as an honest and ambitious man. Andrews insisted that the Union be preserved and said that he had been offered employment which would allow him to render great service to the Union army as a scout (read: spy) and gatherer of secret information in Kentucky. Secretly, however, in his mind Andrews had been planning a bold undertaking that happened to coincide with General Mitchel's intense desire to destroy the rail lynchpin at Chattanooga, thereby splitting the Confederacy in two. The plan Andrews and Mitchel formed proved to be Andrews' undoing; he was captured, tried and hanged. No information has been preserved regarding Andrews' court-martial. Spying and treason, both capital offenses in the South, were the charges he faced. Several days after Andrews' execution, Elizabeth Layton's family learned of his fate in the newspapers. They had kept news of his incarceration and trial from his fiancée. It was shortly before their wedding was to take place that she learned the truth about Andrews. The young woman slid into a deep depression and died two years later, of a broken heart, it was said.

James Andrews, whose name the astounding event that was to follow bears to this day, was cordially received by General Mitchel, and for some time that Sunday night the two were sequestered. Of the meeting no records were kept or mention was ever made, but it is a certainty that at this time Mitchel gave his permission and authorized Andrews to carry out a daring plan designed to sabotage southern rail traffic,

aiming precisely at Chattanooga. The next day the plan was set in motion. Andrews' target was the Western & Atlantic Railroad, running 138 miles northward from Atlanta to Chattanooga, where it met two other lines from Virginia and Memphis.

Selection of the men needed for the secret operation took place on Monday, April 7. Out of twenty-four men chosen from among those who had stepped up to be considered, twenty-three were soldiers from Mitchel's 3rd Division, and all came from three Ohio regiments: the 2nd, the 21st and the 33rd. One man was a civilian. They were told to report to General Mitchel, who informed them that they were to destroy bridges over a southern main line. Then he said, "Your mission is very hazardous. It is not pleasant for me to send such a number of picked men into the enemy's power; but in war great risks must be run, and we are engaged in a war of right and wrong; armed treason must be met and conquered; and if you fall, you die in a glorious cause," as Pittenger remembered the General's words. Three engineers were chosen, men well experienced in operating a locomotive. Others were mechanics, farmers, and William Pittenger, who was a schoolteacher and war correspondent and who would write a popular account of the incident; and also, at thirty-two years of age, George Davenport Wilson, cobbler, the oldest member of the group. The men procured civilian clothes for themselves and set out on foot in small groups to Shelbyville, where they were to seek out Andrews. They were enthusiastic about their mission to carry out what would become one of the defining events of the Civil War. The men were aware that they had made a commitment both bold and dangerous, yet, when asked if any one of them had a change of heart, no man backed out.

At dusk Monday evening, April 7, James J. Andrews and his Ohioans gathered on a farm near Shelbyville. The spot is now identified by a marker on Tennessee Route 64. He was frank in his explanation of his plan to help Mitchel capture Chattanooga, neither disguising its hazards nor downplaying its hardships. In sum, the task assigned to the Ohioans was to steal a railroad engine, and drive it to Chattanooga destroying bridges and telegraph wires on the way. What Andrews did not tell his men was that they would steal the engine right next to a Confederate army camp. Once behind enemy lines, the men were to play the role of Kentuckians who could no longer tolerate Yankee occupation in their commonwealth, so they were heading south to join a Confederate regiment. If they were cornered, they were to enlist in the Confederate army to save themselves as a last resort, a measure that was not likely to be questioned, as the South was said to be desperate for fighting forces. *TO BE CONTINUED (in the November 2015 Historicalog)*