

Service and Sacrifice: The Kidnapping of the *General*

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Part III (Continued from the November 2015 *Historicalog*. Part I & Part II are available online under the “Members Only” tab at www.wchsmuseum.org)

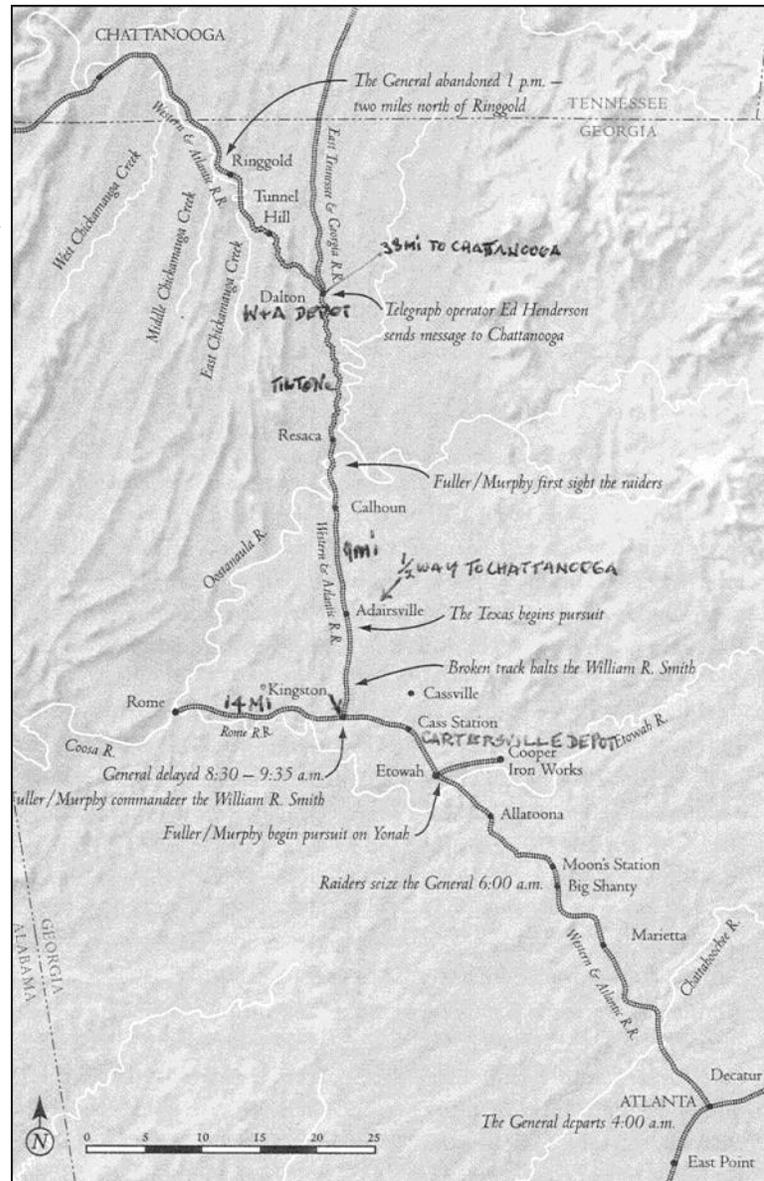
Meanwhile, Fuller, the conductor of the purloined train, now joined by the Western & Atlantic’s machine shop foreman ran as fast as they could, at first opportunity jumping onto a handcar and then commandeering a small old switch-engine. Then the two pursuers took another locomotive, the *Catoosa*, pulling a car with some forty soldiers aboard, and were finally able to make better time chasing the *General*. Then the unthinkable occurred. A southbound train, which, intending to let the *General* by, “stopped...in such a manner as completely to close up the other end of the switch.” After another unnerving delay and a forced stop to take on water and stock the tender with firewood, every passing minute bringing the Confederates on the *Catoosa* closer, the *General* went speeding northward at 60 MPH, narrowly avoiding a head-on crash with a southbound passenger train. The irony in the situation was that Mitchel was now maneuvering his troops toward Chattanooga; thus the crowding of the rails with extra trains moving out threatened Confederate supplies and freight cars and only served to make the raiders’ mission even more difficult.

Lacking all communication with the outside, in the throes of growing unease, the boxcar raiders wondered why Andrews had not appointed a “second-in-command” to direct the men riding behind while he himself dealt with major issues. One man saw this arrangement as potentially advantageous in case of a fight, for example, and proceeded to suggest George Wilson, a private, as second-in-command, seemingly an unusual nomination, as there were three sergeants and one regimental sergeant-major in the group. But the suggestion may have carried overtones of others’

estimation of Wilson as a leader, as alluded to earlier in this article.

At Adairsville the *General* met the nemesis which would finally put a stop to the chase. Now they were halfway to Chattanooga. A southbound freight pulled by an engine named *Texas* had been stopped by the two men from the Western & Atlantic who had been pursuing all along. The *Texas* “was equal to the *General* in almost every respect.” Both locomotives had been built in New Jersey according to identical specifications. The *Texas* looked like the *General*, having the same five-foot driving wheels, cow-catcher, square lamp and funnel stack. Its major advantage was that its engine was of the same class as that of the *General*. The *Texas* was driven two miles in reverse back to the Adairsville depot, where its twenty-one freight cars were parked on a siding, leaving only the tender. There was no turntable at Adairsville, so the *Texas* would have to chase the *General* in reverse. Here were two equally matched locomotives, the one speeding up the line in reverse at 50 MPH, both engaged in “...a trial of speed...a race which for desperate daredevil recklessness, velocity and the high stakes at issue was never equaled on land or water on the American continent,” one of the raiders later wrote. The *Catoosa*, with a carload of Confederate soldiers in tow, now joined the chase behind the *Texas*.

The *General* was approaching the beginning of the end. Andrews’ men were attempting to set the great Oostenaula River bridge on fire when they heard a train whistle. The pursuers now were closing in, and the *Texas* kept too close behind the *General* to allow taking on any more wood

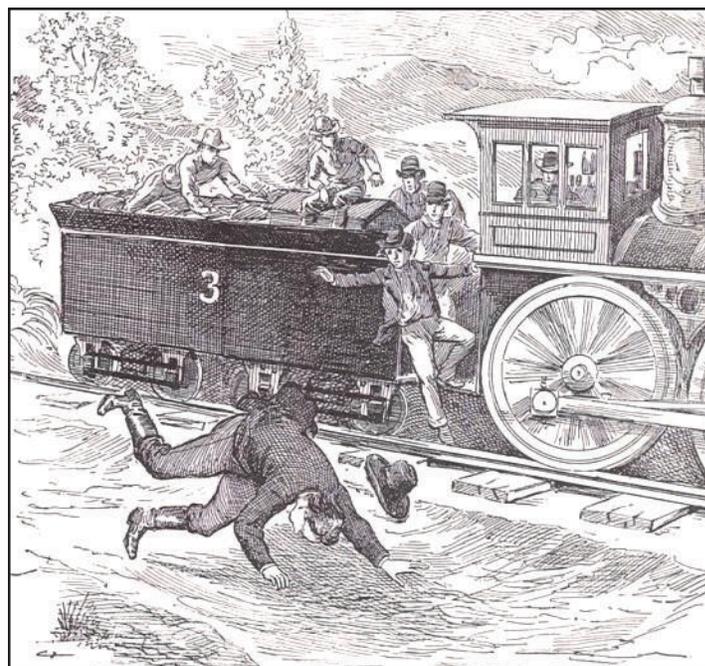


The perilous journey of Andrews’ Raiders. Map by Joseph Clark, from Bonds, Stealing the General, Yardley, Pennsylvania, Westholme Publishing, 2007, p. 115, (annotations added).

and water. With this decision the mission turned from offensive to defensive. Two boxcars had been cut loose. The raiders threw cross-ties as obstacles, but at such high speeds, some bounced far off the track. The soaking rains would prevent the Chickamauga Creek bridges from burning at all, so they kept going. Unrelenting pursuit at high speeds exacerbated the fuel situation; reaching Chattanooga seemed doubtful now. Never slowing, the *General* ploughed through the station at Dalton, where the track ran under the roof. Nor did they dare to slow down to destroy "Tunnel Hill," where engineers began in 1847 to construct the first railroad tunnel south of the Mason-Dixon Line. The raiders considered the 1447-foot tunnel to be an ideal spot for an ambush, but Andrews ordered full speed ahead with their remaining wood. The *Texas* crew knew now that it was but a matter of time. The Ohioans tried to burn the remaining car and uncoupled it on a covered bridge, but the formidable *Texas*, still in reverse, drove right into it and pushed the smoldering car to the next side-track. George Wilson and his fifteen companions would continue their flight in the now-empty tender.

Despite all possible haste to cut the telegraph lines, a message had gotten through from conductor Fuller on the *Texas* to the Confederate commander at Chattanooga. So it happened that Confederate troops set up an ambush and blockaded the track south of Chattanooga, ending once and for all James Andrews' hope of a successful arrival in that city and ultimately connecting with General Mitchel. Extreme measures by the Ohioans had been grossly insufficient to fuel the *General*. All the raiders' efforts combined gained them only another eight painfully slow miles, as far as Ringgold, Georgia. (One raider likened the *General's* failure to "the last struggles of a faithful horse.") Andrews now ordered the exhausted men to strike out on their own, contrary to his earlier orders, and head for Federal lines. This was an order a military man never would have given, for the men's safety required that they stay together; but Andrews had no military experience, thus his order "led directly to the calamities that followed," wrote Pittenger. The *General* could not climb the grade up the hill past the Ringgold depot, the great drivers turning ever more slowly as the raiders jumped off one by one, 18 miles south of Chattanooga. The engineers, in a last desperate measure, pulled the reverse lever, intending to send the *General* down the hill to crash into the *Texas*, but the *Texas* merely reversed itself too, that is, drove forward, allowing space between for the *General* to come to its final dead stop. At 1 o'clock, just over seven hours and 87 miles after the kidnapping at Big Shanty, the ambitious undertaking meant to hasten the end of the war came to an end itself.

Pittenger, the most widely read chronicler of the Andrews Raid and its aftermath, has written that the principal reasons for the failure of the mission were, mainly, that the delay of one day caused extra trains to be moving south, putting obstacles between the *General* and Mitchel, who was on time at Huntsville. Mitchel had no knowledge of



Leaving the Locomotive. From Pittenger, William. "Daring and Suffering..." New York, War Publishing Company, 1887, p. 151.

the raiders' delay of one day. Furthermore, on Friday, the original date for the mission, the weather had cleared sufficiently to allow the lighting of fires, but on Saturday heavy rains resumed. Andrews had previously demonstrated that he preferred to stick to his plans, to use strategy rather than engage in combat, as in speeding through the tunnel instead of setting up an ambush; he was not a military man, nor did he think like one. One of the raiders opined that they were chosen to be laborers, not fighters. Finally, the unrelenting pursuit by the two Western & Atlantic men afforded the raiders no intervals necessary for refueling, nor was it possible to elude them due to the fact that the two pursuers picked up help along the way: the *Catoosa* and the *Texas*.

However, because of the incident, failure or not, the Union gained some important advantages, among them, hundreds of Confederate troops were removed from the line of battle in order to guard bridges, trestles, tunnels, depots—having the effect of diverting Confederate forces. The raid and its aftermath served to establish Northern valor and courage, as, until this time in the war, it was the South which had demonstrated the will to win battles. When asked later by a Confederate soldier whether Mitchel had any more like him, George Wilson, considered by his comrades to be one of their most heroic, replied, "Why, we are the worst men of his division, the refuse of the whole army, and he only sent us down here to get rid of us!" as Pittenger quotes him.

A granite marker has been placed near the spot where the chase ended. The locomotive *General*, having suffered only negligible damage during the raid, became a war relic, maintained and preserved to this day. The *General* served at the battle of Kennesaw Mountain, and after the war pulled passenger cars and became perhaps the most famous

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locomotive in America.

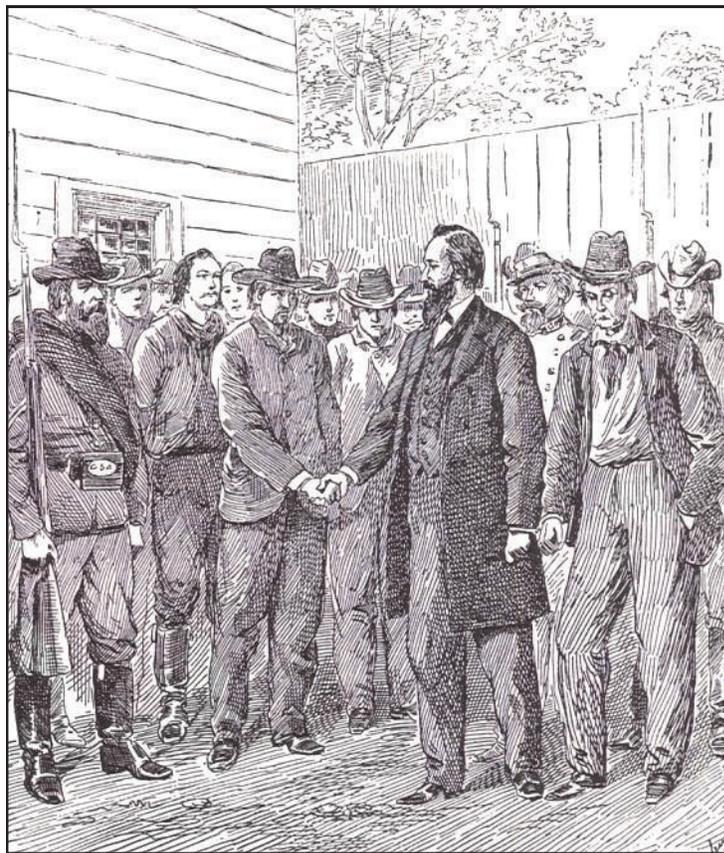
Leaping from the tender, the raiders scattered into the woods, not knowing where they were or which way to go. They were hunted like wild animals, bloodhounds being set after them from all directions, the *Catoosa* Confederates joined by men from the countryside who jumped at the chance to “shoot some Yankees.” The capture of the first three Ohioans came only too soon; unfortunately they gave their names and ranks, hoping thereby to gain protection under the rules of war. Fettered together with a log chain around their necks, the three were taken to Chattanooga. The next capture involved two men, one being the second youngest of the Ohioans, Jacob Parrott, eighteen years old. Refusing adamantly to give the enemy any information at all, he was stripped and forcibly held down over a boulder while one hundred lashes were laid on his back. Parrott told the Confederates nothing. George Davenport Wilson was among the four men caught next, having severely injured himself on jumping off the train, and unable to run or even walk fast. Stopping at a house to ask for food, their only recourse after having been refused was to drink a bucket of milk they found set out on the porch. The next day some fifty men with tracking dogs captured them. Wilson had proposed that the Kentucky story be dropped and a new ruse invented. There was no time to rehearse, however; the Ohioans became entangled in their lies and were soon found out. One of the man-hunters put his pistol to Wilson’s head, his finger ready to pull the trigger, “when his hand was turned away by a Major,” as Pittenger remembered. The raiders’ hands were then tied and they were marched to a house about a mile away, and much to their surprise, were given a hearty supper before being taken to Ringgold and to jail. It was now Sunday evening, one week from Andrews’ visit to General Mitchel.

The capture of Andrews occurred the very next day. His “striking personal appearance” gave his identity away to persons who had known him on his previous forays as a smuggler, as well as to those who had noticed him in the cab of the *General*. In irons he and two raiders were taken to Chattanooga, to “the worst of all prisons,” Pittenger laments, for soon Andrews would be joined there by his Ohioans. “Our leader had been trusted by the enemy and had betrayed them.” Not long afterward six more chained raiders arrived at Swims’ jail, as the prison was named, after its downright mean and hateful keeper. George Wilson was among the six. He had been jailed at Marietta and then was taken in chains to Dalton, where a contingent of kind ladies gave him and his fellows food, seemingly oblivious to a raging mob outside. In the morning they were transported to Swims’ jail, where the raiders, together now, quickly discovered they were not the only living things that populated the filthy place. The men were to spend three agonizing, dehumanizing weeks in this black, vermin-infested dungeon.

During this time General Ormsby Mitchel had received a promotion to Major General. It appeared that he was once

again on his own, no help forthcoming from Generals Buell or Halleck at Corinth. He did not report the failed mission to Washington or to his commander, General Buell. Mitchel instead was engaged in bridge-burning and making his successes known. He is said to have believed that the raiders had all been hanged. The Andrews Raiders, it seemed, had been forgotten by their own military superiors.

The captives realized they would be put on trial for spying and sabotage. Their fate would serve as an example to the Unionist insurgents in eastern Tennessee. The men chose to act with determination in order to be prepared for whatever might befall them, so a “trial” was organized as a constructive way to pass the time. “To Geo. D. Wilson and myself fell the main task of outlining our defense and drilling all the party into it,” recalled Pittenger. He added that the outline they prepared “was so closely adhered to that the enemy never learned that we [began as] volunteers and intelligent participants in the enterprise.” George Wilson served as prosecutor. Basically their defense revolved around 1) having been appointed to serve by their officers in the belief they would be acting under the rules of war; 2) not being previously acquainted with Andrews; 3) not knowing what their service would entail other than destruction of communications in Confederate territory; 4) wearing civilian clothes so they would not alarm the public; 5) not entering any Confederate camp; 6) their expectation of protection as



“Boys, meet me on the other side of Jordan.” From Pittenger, William. *“Daring and Suffering...”* New York, War Publishing Company, 1887, p. 249.

prisoners of war.

As for Andrews himself, his betrayal having become known to the enraged Confederates, he “could not now turn around, even with his marvelous adroitness and unsurpassed powers of deception, and make them believe that the enterprise...was intended as the means of deceiving the Federals only the more completely,” wrote Pittenger. Andrews’ court-martial was held first, but he was not sentenced at that time.

Andrews’ sentencing and the Ohioans’ trials were now postponed. Mitchel’s army was threatening Chattanooga. The prisoners were sent to Atlanta, where they were confronted by a howling mob eager for a hanging. Then a few days later they were returned to Swims’ jail in Chattanooga, and it became known that at the time of the locomotive theft they were indeed under orders and not volunteers. George Wilson, in conversations with their guards, had been led to believe that chances were good for their exchange; the Confederates, however, insisted on a trial to first prove the raiders’ military status. Delays occurred, hopes rose and fell, escapes were planned and not carried out. Then an order was received to take twelve raiders to Knoxville for trial. George Wilson, having special permission to take fresh air in the prison yard because he was injured, was the first to hear and was told he should select those who would go. Would his selection mean death for these men? There was no way he could know, for, as Pittenger explains, if George chose the most prominent members of their group in hopes that it could mean their exchange, “the [Confederate] plan was hit on of making him unconsciously select the men to die.”

It had been six weeks since the raid. Obviously Andrews was beyond hope; the Confederates’ lust for vengeance was too strong; “he had played a fearful game and lost.” His parting words to the men about to leave for Knoxville were, “Boys,...meet me on the other side of Jordan.” He received his death warrant on May 31. The next day Andrews escaped from Swims’ jail, only to be captured to await execution on June 7 in Atlanta, chosen because of renewed bombardment of Chattanooga by the Federals. The scaffold was built, his grave was open nearby, there was no coffin. It was a horrible death, “indescribable,” Pittenger reported. Andrews was laid in the earth, no shroud was provided, his iron shackles still welded onto his limbs. His gravesite was unknown for many years.

The twelve who had been chosen for trial were remanded into the hands of some of Morgan’s Raiders, guerrillas fighting for the South, who treated them with civility. The accused twelve were uneasy about the charge of spying. Kidnapping the *General* was not mentioned in the indictment. Pittenger cynically observed that courts-martial are “organized to convict.” Each day one of the men was taken out of the cell to hear the charges read, a few witnesses questioned, and then he was returned to the others. The monotony of the proceedings soon rendered the court “very inattentive.” The accused Ohioans were not allowed to hear their counsel’s defense. No records of the courts-martial have ever come to light, and the trial procedure remains controversial to the present day. In George D. Wilson’s trial, the testimony of a Confederate lieutenant—that the raiders passed a picket line—was shown to be false by the president of the court himself. And suddenly the venue of the trial was changed once again, due to reports that Mitchel was now marching on Chattanooga, and Knoxville was threatened, so the men were taken to Atlanta. They wanted to escape before they were moved, having come to disbelieve Confederate assurances that the Union soldiers would not receive the death penalty, as Andrews had. Apparently George Wilson had been sorely deceived about this; at any rate, he had been injured, making his own escape nearly impossible; and he was sure some of his comrades would be killed in the attempt. He hoped for an early release when the war ended. “Alas! Wilson was throwing away his last chance of life, and knew it not!” lamented Pittenger later. Wilson told his friends of a horrific dream the night of June 17th wherein he saw great heaps of newly dug earth. TO BE CONTINUED in the May 2016 *Historicalog*.