

## The Burning - 1964

After the Battle of Fisher's Hill in September 1864 Confederate troops retreated south. Union troops followed and General Philip Sheridan set up his main camps in Rockingham County. The second week of October, his forces began their strategic withdrawal down the Valley to the north, through Shenandoah County, carrying out General Ulysses Grant's July orders to clear and clean the Valley of every form of subsistence.

Gen. Sheridan had his infantry march first and positioned Gen. Wesley Merritt's cavalry division on the Valley Pike and Gen. George Custer's cavalry division on the Back Road. These troops were told to burn all mills, outbuildings, barns and haystacks, and to carry off or destroy all livestock and other items edible by man or beast.

A dispatch sent by Sheridan from Woodstock reported that "I have destroyed over 2,000 barns filled with wheat, hay, and farming implements; over seventy mills filled with flour and wheat; have driven in front of the army over 4,000 head of stock, and have killed and issued to the troops not less than 3,000 sheep." He later added that he destroyed "a woolen mill, a powder mill, 8 saw mills, 7 furnaces and 4 tanneries".

Despite these reports some structures were saved. Barns at New Market and near Mt. Jackson, because of earlier kindnesses by the owners, were spared. Two mills at Edinburg were saved as were the Sheetz mill to the west, Fisher's mill at Fisher's Hill and Spengler's mill at Strasburg.

A war correspondent traveling with Sheridan's army described the destruction: "the atmosphere from horizon to horizon has been black with the smoke of a hundred conflagrations, and at night a gleam, brighter and more lurid than sunset, has shot from every verge... The wailing of women and children, mingling with the crackling of flames, has sounded from scores of buildings. I have seen mothers weeping over the loss of that which was necessary to their children's lives... their last cow, their last bit of flour pilfered by stragglers, the last morsel they had in the world to eat or drink.... The completeness of the destruction is awful. Hundreds of nearly starving people are going North..."

This account was taken from Richard Kleese's book, *Shenandoah County In The Civil War*.

This moment from the past was presented by the Shenandoah County Historical Society.