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Washington Post

June 13, 2002

Column: A HOUSE DIVIDED Linda Wheeler

In a Little-Known Night of Terror, Union Troops Torched Tiny Haymarket

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Edition: F
Section: 4
Page: T18

Estimated printed pages: 3

Article Text:

"My God! You are not going to burn my house down?" the widow asked the two Union soldiers standing at her Haymarket door in the cold, early morning darkness of Nov. 4, 1862. "I am a poor woman with a family of children and have a little son at the point of death." One of the soldiers ordered Williama Newman to collect her sick child and get out of her home. Then they set it ablaze.

The men torched 13 of the 17 buildings in the Prince William County village on that Tuesday morning, a little-known terrorist act that historians Tom and Beverly Lowry came upon while indexing 80,000 Union court-martial files at the National Archives.

"Destroying an entire village is pretty rare," Tom Lowry said. "The records are full of fascinating stories, but this is one of a kind."

Not exactly the entire village. Among the few buildings that survived was St. Paul's Episcopal Church, a classic red brick, arched-door building that is still in service. Erected in 1801, it became a Confederate hospital after the First and Second Manassas battles. According to a plaque near the front door, Union troops used it as a stable after the village was burned.

Lt. Kurd Veltheim of the 68th New York Volunteers was arrested within days of the fire. According to the transcript of the proceeding, the three charges stated that he "wantonly and maliciously set fire to and burned . . . houses and other buildings with the furniture thereof and without any lawful order or authority . . . cruelly endangering the lives of helpless women and children and defenseless citizens of the United States," with "conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman."

At Veltheim's court-martial in Gainesville, Mrs. Newman testified that the men told her they had orders to burn all the houses in the village.

And what happened to her sick son?

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"He is dead and buried," she said, according to transcripts of the trial.

When did he die?

"About two o'clock that morning, about one hour after he was taken out," Newman replied.

Was his death hastened by the exposure that night?

"Yes, sir. I certainly think it was," Newman answered.

Sarah M. Turner, in her book, "**Haymarket**, A Town in Transition," identified the child as Nixon Newman.

Newman's neighbor, James Shirley, said he begged the man who came to his door early that morning not to burn his house.

"He said he had orders to burn every house in the village," Shirley said. "He piled the furniture on the floor and set fire to the pile and then he lit a broom and ran into the other room and touched it to some clothing and soon the house was in flames."

In her book, Turner said Shirley had an "excellent harness shop," a building that was also destroyed that morning.

The four-day military trial ended Nov. 10 with the testimony of Veltheim, who did not deny that he had burned the village with the help of several soldiers. He said a military detachment had searched several homes in **Haymarket** on Nov. 3, and confiscated clothing and arms belonging to the Southern army. Later that night, a Union soldier riding through the village was fired on from one of the houses. Veltheim said a captain, who had checked with a general, had approved a plan for several soldiers to return to the town and search for the gunman.

"Before we started, he said, 'Burn the damned rebelnest town; that will cease the shooting afterwards,' " Veltheim testified.

After confronting a **Haymarket** man who carried a musket and seeing several other men running from the rear of a house, Veltheim said he heard a big shell explode near where he stood.

"[I] considered it my holy duty as a soldier and an officer to . . . carry out the **burning**," he told the court.

Veltheim, a German citizen who used a translator during the proceedings, said that in other armies he would have been punished for not **burning** the houses.

On Nov. 29, Veltheim was found guilty on all charges. His punishment was dismissal from the Army.

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