

The Real History Behind *Trial of Courage*

Sherman's March to the Sea

Trial of Courage begins where *Trial by Fire* left off. When we first see Tom in this novel, he is still in Atlanta on guard duty. Soon, his regiment joins with General Sherman's entire division on the famous March to the Sea in an effort to "make Georgia howl." This "total war" that Sherman embarked on was a scorched earth policy, which wreaked havoc from Atlanta to Savannah. In December 1864, Sherman famously presented the city of Savannah, GA as a "Christmas gift" to President Lincoln.



Sherman's Headquarters in Savannah

From *The Great South*, by E. King

Grand Review of the Armies

The month of April 1865 was one filled with triumph and turmoil. After General Robert E. Lee surrendered to General Grant at Appomattox Court House, Virginia, it was only a matter of time before General Joseph Johnston would surrender the Army of the Tennessee to General Sherman. After the surrenders and before the soldiers in the Union army could return home, there was a Grand Review of the Armies in Washington, D.C. (then Washington City). This grand parade took place on two days in May. This event was to welcome the victorious Federal army and to help ease the pain the city was feeling after the loss of President Lincoln. On the

first day, soldiers of the Army of the Potomac and the Army of the Shenandoah marched down Pennsylvania Avenue with polished uniforms and precision. The next day, Sherman led the Armies of Georgia and the Army of the Tennessee which had both arrived “tattered and worn.” Some in the crowd called them “rough-necks.” This is the group in which the fictional character Tom was in during this event in the novel. It was really fun writing this scene, and it took me a lot of tries to get it just right.



Photo
courtesy of
Army War
College

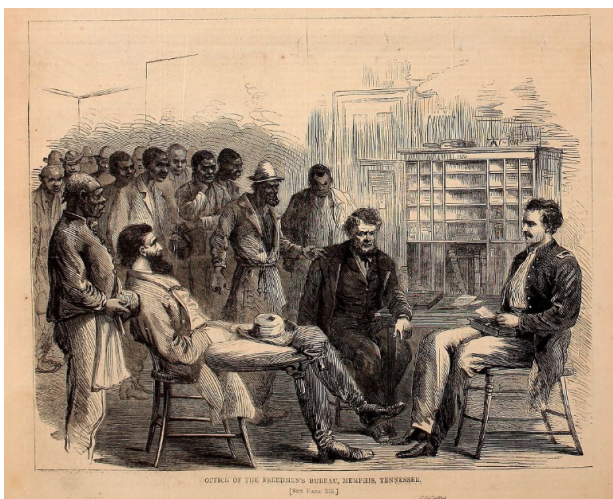
15th Corps, Major General Frank Blair, Commanding
May 24, 1865

15th Corps part of Major General William Tecumseh Sherman's Army of the Tennessee marching down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C. during the Grand Review.

Freedmen's Bureau in Memphis, TN

The U.S. government established the Freedmen's Bureau in 1865 in order to provide relief and protection for freed slaves. Captain Thomas A. Walker, who makes an

appearance in this novel, served as superintendent of the West Tennessee branch in Memphis. In *Trial of Courage*, Joseph and Elizabeth/Tom get a labor contract from the Bureau. The contracts allowed former enslaved people to be protected from abusive employers. White



plantation owners would owe their workers one-third of the earnings during a calendar year. Sometimes, however, Bureau offices would be understaffed and could not give as much protection to freed blacks. Some white plantation owners who could not let go of the past took advantage of the understaffed Bureau.

Photo: Harper's Weekly–Freedmen's Bureau Office in Memphis. Photo owned by The New York Library.

Memphis “Race Riots” Massacre of 1866

The war was won, yet the battle was not over. The Memphis “Race Riots” Massacre of 1866 are a little-known but important piece of history. Important not because of any sort of pleasantness whatsoever, but because it is a story that needs to be told in memory of those



freed men, women, and children who paid the price for the hatred that some citizens of Memphis refused to move on from. It is a painful thing to write about, which is why I had to tell this story.

My source was the Freedmen's Bureau official report that was sent to Washington after the event. The riots began in the same manner as I wrote in the novel: it began as a street fight on Causey Street between some police officers and freedmen. One of the officers shot himself in the hand in an accident. Some city officials soon formed a rally and were determined to kill freed blacks

and white people with Northern sympathies. For about three days, Memphis was under the control of a mob. The attacks mostly occurred at night. The mayor of Memphis, John Park, quickly lost control of the city and was reportedly drunk throughout the duration of the riots. Sheriff P. M. Minters attempted to stop the riots from happening but was undermined by City Recorder John Creighton.

Freedmen begged General Runkle (who appears in the novel) for help, but the general was forced to admit that the Bureau could not provide the protection they needed. The mob threatened to burn down the Freedmen's Bureau office, but the building remained untouched.

Three churches, eight schools, and around fifty houses were burned down. Innocent men, women, and children were killed. No property owned by whites was damaged. No arrests were made.

These events helped to put the 14th Amendment into place; because of the riots, Tennessee had to agree to the amendment in order to be accepted back into the Union.

The deaths of the innocent were never brought to justice.

These events and lack of justice should be enough to make us want to never repeat the past. We must remember and honor those whose lives were taken so that we may move forward toward peace.

Photo: courtesy of NPR

Rachel Dilts

Rachel Dilts was the real-life inspiration for the fictional character Rebecca Dehart. Dilts was from Illinois and lived at 152 Causey Street in Memphis. She had been living there since March 1866 and saw the "Race Riots" begin on Monday, April 30. Her eyewitness report was written in the official reports sent to Washington.