

The Real History Behind *Trial by Fire*

The Siege of Vicksburg

For a total of 47 days, Vicksburg, Mississippi was under siege. General Grant saw this city as a strategic one; if captured, it would give the Federal army further access to the Mississippi River. On July 4, 1863, Vicksburg fell into Union hands. The surrender of the city occurred the day after another famous battle came to a close: Gettysburg.

While the Battle of Gettysburg, PA saw the greatest amount of casualties than any other Civil War battle, the Siege of Vicksburg was more essential to the Union winning the war. Having control of the Mississippi River was of great advantage for moving troops, supplies, etc.

During the siege, the 31st Illinois Infantry (Tom's regiment) took part in three assaults: one on May 19, another on May 22, and the last on June 25. The regiment dug trenches under enemy artillery fire and eventually played a major part in achieving a Confederate surrender. The below images belong to the National Park Service and show the monuments to the regiment, marking the exact positions of the 31st Illinois' assault on May 22.



Unit position marker

NPS Image



Unit position markers

NPS Image

Civil War Nurse—Mary Bickerdyke

Like the fictional character of Catherine Evans, there were many women who served as traveling nurses during the Civil War. These women were known as “Angels of the Battlefield.” One such woman was Mary Ann Bickerdyke. In *Trial by Fire*, Elizabeth meets this woman while she is volunteering as a nurse at Gayoso Hotel Hospital. Ms. Bickerdyke was known as “Mother Bickerdyke” for her outstanding services as a nurse during the war. She received formal training at Oberlin College in Ohio, though she did not graduate. The college was one of the only institutions of the time that allowed women to receive a college degree. During the Civil War, Mary Bickerdyke traveled with the Federal army, working to establish more than a hundred field hospitals. She put herself in harm’s way frequently by searching for wounded soldiers. After the war, she became a champion for veterans, fighting to give them the rights they deserved.



Mary Bickerdyke
Photo courtesy of the Ohio History
Connection.

Gayoso Hotel, Memphis, TN

Mary Bickerdyke was in charge of the Gayoso Hotel in Memphis, TN when it was converted into a field hospital in 1863. Wounded soldiers coming from Vicksburg were sent up the Mississippi River to Memphis to receive care. There were many buildings in Memphis that served as army hospitals during the war during the Federal occupation of the city. A few hotels and churches were set aside for this purpose, including the Overton Hotel at Main and Poplar. Today, Gayoso Hotel serves as an apartment building called Gayoso House at Peabody Place.



Beale Street/Beal Avenue

The famous Beale Street in Memphis, TN was originally called Beal Avenue. The street was established in 1841. After the city fell under the control of the Union army in 1863, many freed blacks settled on Beal Avenue. In exchange for work along the Mississippi River, freedmen were promised housing. However, the housing situation bore little, if any, difference from slave villiages on plantations.

Beale Street/Beal Ave.

Photo said to be from the 1860s.

Photo courtesy of Historic Memphis



The Atlanta Campaign

General William T. Sherman led his Federal troops in the Atlanta Campaign in 1864 in hopes to bring the war to an end. The capture of such a prominent city would bring further instability to the Confederacy. It held many advantages, including railroads. Abraham Lincoln himself needed this campaign to be successful if he wanted to run for president a second time. Trench warfare

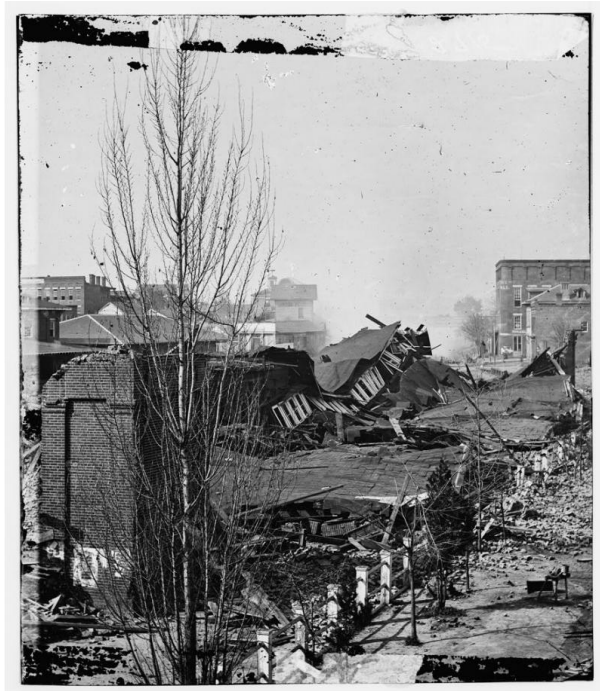
was used during the siege, and in September, Sherman ordered his artillery to increase the shelling of Atlanta. This led to the surrender and mandatory evacuation of the city. Where I moved the burning of Atlanta to September, the actual event took place in November. Federal troops were ordered to burn down anything of military value, including munitions buildings and the like. However, many other buildings were also set ablaze, and officers did nothing to stop it. Soon after, Sherman began his "March to the Sea."

The Battle of Kennesaw Mountain took place during the Atlanta Campaign. The 31st Illinois (Tom's regiment) took part in the slaughter on Kennesaw Mountain, where the Federals lost 3,000 men in the span of less than an hour. The photo to the left is owned by the National Park Service and shows the Illinois monument at Kennesaw Mountain. The photo below shows some of the ruins Sherman left behind in Atlanta.



This picture shows the Illinois Monument

NPS Photo

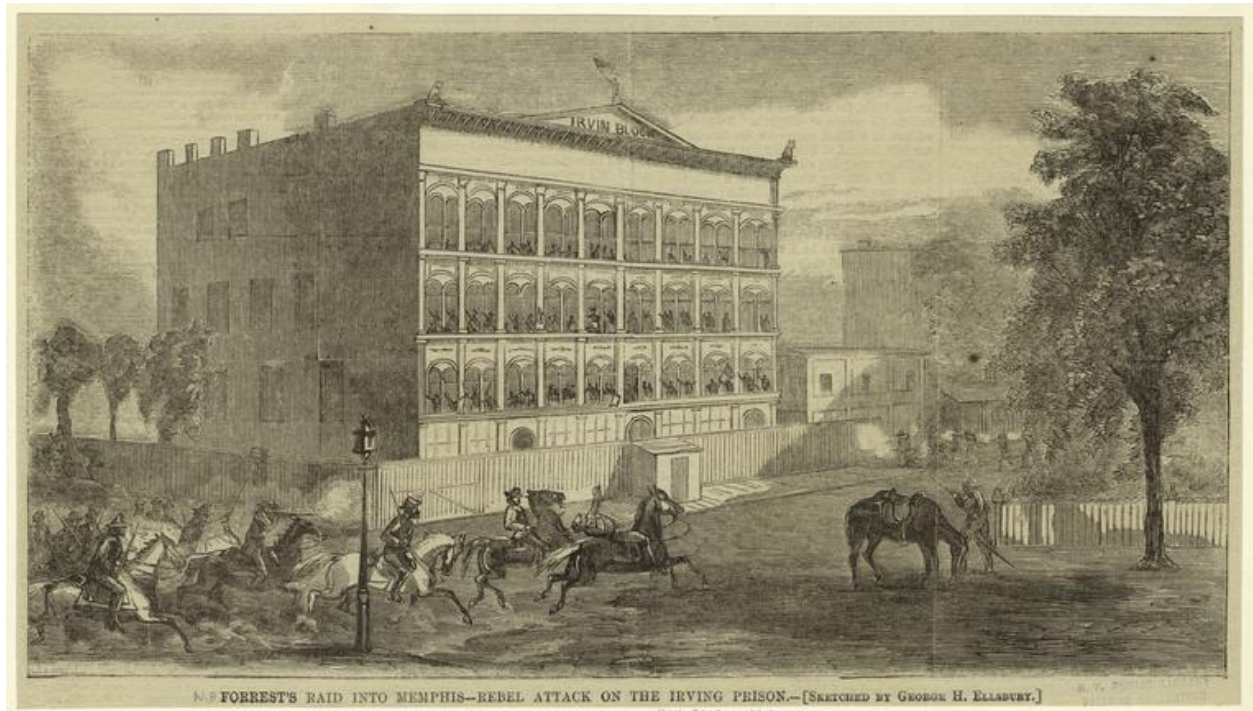


Remains of a depot in Atlanta, 1864

Photo owned by Library of Congress

Second Battle of Memphis

During the span of the Atlanta Campaign, there was also a Second Battle of Memphis, which I did not cover in the novel. I really wanted the scene with Elizabeth and Tom passing one another, and to do that, I had to make some sacrifices. During the Second Battle of Memphis in August 1864, Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest was determined to free the prisoners in Irving Block and to capture three Federal generals stationed in the city. He led an attack on Memphis in hopes of achieving this goal, but his efforts did not achieve victory.



Caption reads: "Forrest's raid into Memphis—Rebel attack on the Irving Prison"
Photo courtesy of Historic Memphis