



# BLUE AND GRAY DISPATCH

## The First Into Richmond?

Bert Dunkerly, April 2, 2021  
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Lithograph depicting the Evacuation Fire (Currier & Ives, 1865) | Library of Congress

The events surrounding the capture of Richmond on April 3, 1865, generated their fair share of controversies. For decades veterans debated the sequence of events, who marched in first, and who raised the first flag. Yet by the late 20th century, these were largely forgotten, and few historians today investigate the capture of Richmond.

The front lines around Fort Harrison, 10 miles southeast of Richmond, had been stagnant for months, with both sides settled into a monotonous routine. Then suddenly, the boredom ended with rapid activity. The Union soldiers who woke up here on April 3 would be spending the night in Richmond. Analyzing these events reveals a fascinating series of actions, and I have tried to organize them chronologically as best I could, based on the writings from different observers.

The better-known Army of the Potomac battled for four years to take Richmond, yet the more obscure and less successful Army of the James took it. Troops who didn't have much luck or glory otherwise earned the honor of capturing the Confederate capital. The Union lines east of the city were occupied by the 24th and all-black 25th Corps of the Army of the James, under the command of Gen. Godfrey Weitzel

On April 2 Union forces broke through at Petersburg, 20 miles to the south. That afternoon and overnight along the lines near Richmond, explosions were heard, and a red glow lit the sky. Weitzel had his troops on alert and ready to move at dawn.



Ruins on Main Street, sketched by A. W. Warren for Harper's Weekly | LOC

Lt. Royal B. Prescott with the 13th New Hampshire wrote on April 2: "About the middle of the afternoon . . . I noticed several army wagons being loaded up and field artillery moving away, and a general air of bustle and activity pervading the enemy's camps. I sent news of this to Gen'l Ripley, and received in reply 'Keep your eyes and ears open.' As darkness came on, these signs increased. There was something ominous in the very air, a feeling that great crisis was at hand. No man slept that night. Each stood ready, musket in hand, for whatever might happen. At . . . half-past four on the morning of the 3rd, there came a sudden blinding glare of light, a concussion that shook the earth and nearly threw us to the ground, and immediately after the . . . Officer of the day . . . galloped up and ordered me to advance the picket line . . . and it was believed that Richmond was being evacuated. "

The sun rose around 6:30 that morning, but long before full daylight, Union troops were up. The night before, as the Confederates destroyed supplies, fires raged out of control. In addition, mobs broke into stores and looted freely. The city was in chaos by dawn.

Perhaps the first Union soldier in the city, now devoid of Confederate troops, was Lt. William Ladd of the 13th New Hampshire. On his initiative he rode forward and described his journey alone into the city early that morning: "I was in the Capitol grounds as early as 5:30 am. I saw no flag on the Capitol at that time. After looking about the grounds and vicinity for a few minutes, and realizing I was alone in the city, I rode back toward Rocketts, and when near there met a white Union Cavalryman—the first Union soldier I had seen in Richmond that morning."



Captured siege guns at Rocketts | LOC

Then he did something extraordinary. Seeing several Confederate ironclad ships anchored in the river nearby, he jumped from his horse and rowed in a boat to the closest ship. According to Ladd: "He quickly ran up the mast, secured the flag, and had just stepped ashore when the magazine blew up and scattered the gunboat in fragments from bank to bank." It was a Hollywood-type moment.

In the meantime, Weitzel ordered a reconnaissance by 40 troopers from the 4th Massachusetts Cavalry. The troopers rode up the New Market Road (now Route 5) from the Union lines toward the city. As the infantry prepared to advance behind them, several Confederate deserters came in, telling of the evacuation of Richmond.

Trooper William Arnold wrote of what happened as the cavalry neared the intersection of Osborn Turnpike and the New Market Road: "In the distance were mounted men and carriages. We halted and Major Stevens and his officers went forward and conferred with the party, who proved to be the Mayor of Richmond accompanied by Judge Meredith and other prominent people of Richmond. The city was formally surrendered to Major Stevens . . ."

Mayor Joseph Mayo asked the Union troops to enter the city and restore law and order. Stevens assured him they would, and accompanied the mayor into the city. The troopers took the New Market Road as it descended to the city. Arnold wrote: "We then went forward at a rapid pace, and coming round a turn in the roadway at Rocketts, came in full view of Richmond." Later General Weitzel met with Mayo to discuss the city's occupation.



Gen. Godfrey Weitzel | LOC

It must have been an incredible experience. From their vantage, the city spread out before them along the James River. The object of four years of war was in full view, exposed and ready for the taking. Arnold continues: "We halted for a moment to contemplate the scene. A portion of the city along the James river was on fire. The black smoke was rolling up in great volumes. Major Stevens said, 'Every one of us should feel as proud as if we were promoted to be Brigadier Generals. We gave three cheers and went on and were soon in the streets of Richmond passing Libby's inn; and we clattered up the paved street on the gallop to the Capitol . . ."

Arnold recorded the surreal experience here: "Major Stevens, with some of the officers, rushed into the building and soon the guidons of Company I and H were fluttering from the top of the building.

We were formed around the equestrian statue of Washington . . . Richmond was ours, after four long years of tremendous struggle and sacrifice. I, for one, thought of the services of thousands of the best troops ever rallied to maintain a just cause. That our detail was privileged to land first in Richmond with the flags of Massachusetts was certainly appreciated by us."

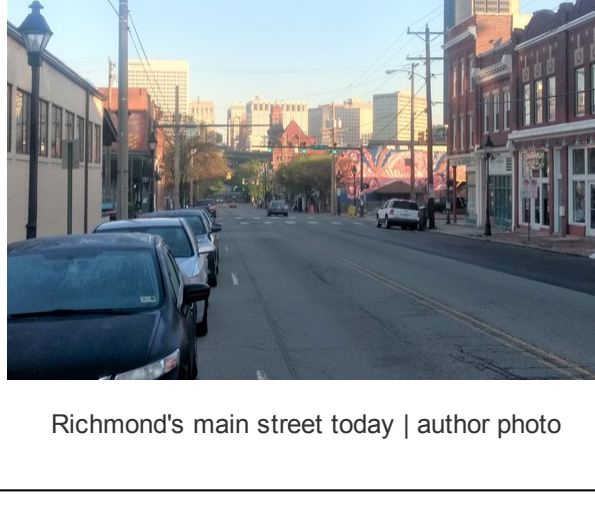
By about 7 o'clock, various Union troops had marched in from their siege lines and were staging at Rockett's Landing, the wharf on the city's outskirts. Gen. Edward Ripley, commanding the 98th New York, 13th New Hampshire, and 9th Vermont, was told to assemble his men for a formal march into the city. The cavalrymen rode out, retracing their route, and passing the assembled infantrymen at Rockett's Landing.

Ripley wrote: "I was also ordered to dress up my own command and put all my regimental bands at the head of the column. I happened to have the unusual number of three." The Union troops marched in on Main Street, turning up 14th Street, and left onto Bank Street, reaching the Capitol grounds around eight o'clock. From there they spread out to secure the area, fight fires, and establish law and order.

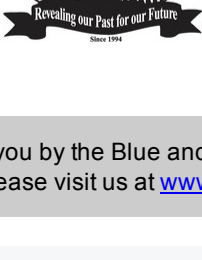
Four Union flags flew over the Virginia State Capitol that day: The two guidons of the 4th Massachusetts Cavalry, a flag hidden by an enslaved person at the start of the war and brought out that day, and a United States flag that had flown over Union headquarters in New Orleans. This large national flag replaced the two cavalry guidons. It is not clear when the other flag, which had flown over the capitol until secession, was raised. The flag from New Orleans is today on display at the Virginia Museum of History and Culture.



The Virginia State Capitol today | author photo

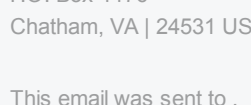


Richmond's main street today | author photo



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