

GENERAL O. M. MITCHEL'S OCCUPATION OF HUNTSVILLE

By Martha B. Gabel

Ormsby McKnight Mitchel was born in Morganfield, Kentucky, on July 28, 1809, but claimed Ohio as his adopted state. He entered West Point Military Academy in 1825. Four years later he graduated fifteenth in a class of forty-six, which included Robert E. Lee and Joseph E. Johnston who later became renowned commanding generals of the Confederate States of America. Upon graduation Mitchel was promoted to a brevet second lieutenantcy in the Second United States Artillery. In the same year he was appointed Acting Assistant Professor of Mathematics at West Point. He resigned his military rank and professorship in 1832 to study law in Cincinnati. In 1834 he became Professor of Mathematics, Philosophy, and Astronomy at Cincinnati College, a position he retained for ten years. During this time, he

urged that an Observatory be established in Cincinnati. Appointed director of the Observatory itself in 1845, he began publishing a noted astronomical journal entitled the Sidereal Messenger. Two years later he became Ohio's State Adjutant-General, followed by an appointment in 1848 as Chief Engineer of the Ohio and Mississippi Railroad. This knowledge of railroad operations was to prove a valuable asset to him during the Civil War.

Mitchel returned to New York in 1859 to serve as director of the Dudley Observatory at Albany. While there he attended the Union meeting at Union Square in New York City on April 20, 1861. His eloquent address on that occasion stirred the emotions of his audience when he declared: "I owe allegiance to no State, and never did, and God helping me, I never will. I owe allegiance to the



Government of the United States.” But, in a reference to the Southern States, he solemnly warned his audience:

I know these men; I know their courage; I have been among them; I have been reared with them; they have courage; and do not yet pretend to think they have not. I tell you what it is, it is no child’s play you are entering upon. They will fight; and with a determination and a power which is irresistible.¹

With war a reality, O. M. (deemed the Ohio Monster) Mitchel turned his attention once again to military service. On August 9, 1861, he was commissioned a brigadier-general of volunteers. At the request of Cincinnati citizens, he was transferred from New York to the Department of the Ohio,

which included his native state of Kentucky as well. Loyal Kentuckians rushed to join Mitchel’s forces. Soon he found himself in command of a brigade, next a division, and then a column of General Don Carlos Buell’s forces.

Mitchel commanded the third regiment of the Army of the Ohio from December 2, 1861, to July 2, 1862, during which time his forces were involved in the campaign of Tennessee and North Alabama. His regiment made a brilliant showing at Bowling Green, Kentucky, in February, 1862.

From Kentucky, the Army of the Ohio moved to Nashville, Tennessee. While the major bulk of Buell’s forces occupied the Volunteer State’s Capitol, Mitchel was sent forward to penetrate Alabama to Huntsville, where he hoped to sever the Memphis and Charleston Railroad line which linked the Confederate armies in the

¹ Benson J. Lossing, Pictorial History of the Civil War in The United States

of America, Vol. I (Philadelphia, 1866), 360.



east and west.² Mitchel knew that if his mission were successful, the way would be open for Buell's Army to sweep into East Tennessee. His experience in railroading enabled Mitchel to understand the necessity to destroy the Huntsville railroad. The Nashville Daily Union, a Union newspaper, described the situation:

This Memphis and Charleston road is the only connection left the rebels between Louisiana, Mississippi and all Alabama west of Pensacola and the Southern seaboard States. Troops can only be sent east from New Orleans, Natchez, Vicksburg, Jackson, Memphis, Baton Rouge, or Mobile, or to those

points from Virginia, North or South Carolina, or Georgia, over the Memphis and Charleston road, the only railroad line now connecting the east and west of the rebellion. Let that road be once broken and the Southern Confederacy is cut into as effectually as if a Chinese wall were built between the Gulf and the seaboard States.³

As Federal forces advanced toward North Alabama, Confederate officers in Huntsville organized four companies of militia to resist the advance. When Federal gunboats penetrated as far as Florence on February 9, 1862, two Confederate companies from Huntsville went to Tuscumbia by

² Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel, editors, Battles and Leaders of the Civil War. Vol. II (New York, 1888), 701-2. Huntsville was considered a prime link in the Confederacy because of the transportation system offered

by the Tennessee River, network of roads connecting Tennessee and Georgia, and all important railroad system.

³ Whitelaw Reid, Ohio in the War: Her Statesmen and Soldiers. (Cincinnati, 1872).



train, but returned home shortly because the vessels had already departed. John Withers Clay, editor of the Huntsville Democrat, warned, however, that the emergency had not passed. He pointed out that Federal penetration to Florence was reconnaissance to ascertain information about Confederate defenses. "If not prevented by unexpected force, we have no doubt within a week or two they will return and fortify themselves on the Tennessee River," he predicted.⁴

Two months later, Clay's dreadful prediction came true when Mitchel's command came sweeping into Huntsville. Rolling stock had been collected in the town for shipment to a place of less danger; but because of the treachery of a telegraph operator who withheld knowledge of the approaching Federal raid from the local officials, all was lost. To prevent its

falling into the hands of the Federals, much more of the stock was destroyed than was captured.⁵

According to General Buell's report on Federal operations in North Alabama, Mitchel's main objective was to concentrate his forces in the Huntsville area and cut Confederate communications by occupying the Memphis and Charleston railroad. This road linked Huntsville with Buell's destination of Chattanooga. To

accomplish his objective, Mitchel set out with one division with three field batteries (eighteen pieces) of artillery, a regiment of cavalry, and two companies of engineer troops, a total force of about 8,000 men.⁶

Mitchel's march from Nashville advanced through Murfreesboro, Shelbyville, and Fayetteville, Tennessee, meeting little resistance along the way. Prior to entering Huntsville,

⁴ Mimi Simms, "Life in Huntsville, Alabama in 1862". Typed Mss. In Huntsville Public Library, 19.

⁵ Walter L. Fleming, Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama. (New York, 1949), 260.

⁶ Johnson and Buel, op. cit., II, 701.



however, Mitchell sent forward a scouting party to New Market on April 5, 1862. It is believed that these scouts were the first Federal soldiers to enter Madison County. Courthouse records meanwhile had been carried by wagon to Blountsville as a precaution.

On the march to Huntsville, Mitchell's troops passed the magnificent estate of Leroy Pope Walker, the Confederate Secretary of War whose mansion was now deserted and furniture removed. But the large number of slaves who remained on the premises gave the soldiers a cordial welcome. Among the prominent local Union sympathizers who remained in the vicinity were Jeremiah Clemens, Judge George W Lane, Judge D. C. Humphreys, C. C. Sheets, and David P. Lewis. All of these men had gone from the Confederate to the Union side except

Judge Lane, who had maintained his allegiance to the Federal government throughout the secession movement.

By this time the Huntsville area was filled with deserters from Confederate ranks following the Battle of Shiloh on April 6-7. "Tories," "renegades", and "traitors" also abounded in the vicinity, acting as spies and aiding and abetting Federal troops who pillaged and plundered the defenseless community. It is little wonder that editor Clay described Huntsville during this time as a "center of disaffection."⁷

On April 10, Mitchell halted his cavalry about eight miles north of the town to await the arrival of artillery and infantry. He wanted to strike a decisive blow so that he could be assured of a successful railroad capture. Any apprehension he may have had was unnecessary, because his entire march had been well concealed.

⁷ Edward Chambers Betts, Early History of Huntsville, Alabama 1804 to 1870 (Montgomery, 1916), 97.



Confederate leaders had been unable to obtain any positive information of his whereabouts or his destination, though they knew he was moving rapidly southward into the heart of the Confederacy.

Having been summoned to their feet shortly after two a.m. to prepare for the first thrust, the Federal troops reached Huntsville about dawn and took the sleeping town almost completely by surprise. "The clattering noise of the cavalry," wrote a spectator, "aroused them from their slumber in the dawn of the morning, and they flocked to door and window, exclaiming, with blanched cheek and faltering tongue. 'They come! They come! The Yankees come!' Men rushed into the streets almost naked, the women fainted, the children screamed, the darkies laughed, and for a time a scene of perfect terror reigned."⁸

Two work crews had been sent with picks and crowbars to tear up the railway at the east and west

sections of town, while the cavalry had moved directly upon the city and the railroad station. The plan had been successful and Mitchel had accomplished a bloodless victory indeed. A correspondent for the Cincinnati Gazette reported the capture in the following manner:

An advance force of one hundred and fifty cavalry, together with a section of battery, first caught sight of Huntsville, and the lovely cedar surrounding it. They were advancing upon the doublequick, when two locomotives, with trains attached, suddenly made their appearance upon the railroad. They were moving in the direction of Stevenson. The Federals shot at the first train and brought it to a halt. A shot at the second train also halted it.

⁸ Lossing, op. cit., II, 266.



But in the meantime, the engineer of the first train was quietly getting up steam, and when nobody was suspecting such a thing, he suddenly started off. The cavalry went into pursuit, and actually chased the locomotive for ten miles, before it got away.⁹

Mitchel listed as captured about 200 prisoners, fifteen locomotives, a large amount of passenger, box and platform cars, a telegraph, and two Southern Railway mails. From his headquarters in Huntsville, he ordered the Ninth Brigade under Colonel Joshua Sill to drive the Confederates out of Stevenson. The Eighth Brigade was sent to seize Decatur and Colonel John B. Turchin's troops converged on Athens. By April 16, it was all over and Mitchel exultantly thanked his soldiers by saying:

You have struck blow after blow with a rapidity unparalleled. Stevenson fell, sixty miles to the east of Huntsville, Decatur and Tuscumbia have been in like manner seized, and are now occupied. In three days, you have extended your front of operations more than one hundred miles, and your morning guns at Tuscumbia may now be heard by your comrades on the battlefield made glorious by their victory before Corinth.¹⁰

For his achievements in the North Alabama campaign without the loss of one life, Mitchel was commissioned a Major-General of Volunteers. With orders to report directly to the War Department, his force was constituted an independent corps.

But what of the telegraph operator who had aided

⁹ Reid, op. cit., 20-1.

¹⁰ Lossing, op. cit., II, 267.



Mitchel? According to an Alabama newspaper, Spirit of the South, the operator was treated thusly:

In Huntsville when that city was captured by the Federals, there was a Yankee Operator (Telegraph) who suppressed from the citizens the news of the approach of the enemy so that they had scarcely an hour's notice of their danger before they were under Yankee rule. That smart operator, after his cute Yankee trick, soon made it convenient notwithstanding the presence of Mitchel forces, and the surrender of the city, to retire, to enjoy in his fresh won laurels, in a more Northern latitude.¹¹

Huntsville fortunately did not suffer as much terrible

destruction of war that was inflicted on other battle-shattered towns across the South. Nevertheless, the possibility of battle always loomed in the background because each time Confederate troops moved within striking distance, the Federals in Huntsville would immediately fortify the town against an assault. The result was always the destruction of homes or property located at strategic points. There were also threats by some soldiers to set the entire town on fire, but General Mitchel and other officers took measures to protect homes which were used for their quarters.

Federal officers confiscated homes of Confederate soldiers who were away at war. They commandeered rooms in homes of Confederate sympathizers, which in some cases amounted to most, if not all, of the entire house. Mitchel chose the William McDowell home (currently known as the

¹¹ James Record, A Dream Come True. Vol. I (Huntsville 1970), 129.



Henry Chase home) as his residence and headquarters. He set up his desk in the large room in the southwest corner of the house.¹²

The Federals kept close watch over the activities of local citizens during the occupation. Mitchel demanded an oath of allegiance to the United States before passes were granted to leave the town. Provisions were also forbidden without the oath. Confederate money generally lost its value. Food prices in Huntsville were outrageously high. Based on Federal currency, poor quality green tea sold for \$4.00 per pound, common rough trousers were \$13.00 per pair, boots were \$25.00 per pair, and shoes ranged from \$5.00 to \$12.00 per pair.¹³

In addition to their resentment of the oath, local citizens found other reasons to be hostile to the military occupation.

Without taking a pledge to denounce the Confederacy, no citizen could send to mill, bring in provisions, or buy food. Mitchel's declared intention to starve the city into submission further widened the gap between him and the populace.

Since Huntsville did not have a public hospital, Federal troops used the imposing and roomy mansion of Meredith Calhoun. Because of the kindness of Huntsville ladies to the wounded and sick Federal soldiers, the Yankee surgeon published a card of thanks. Smallpox broke out in the army in June, 1862, causing one local citizen to note sadly that "we are literally visited by 'pestilence and sword.'"¹⁴

This sketch was made by an officer of General Mitchel's command. The view is looking north toward Adams Avenue.

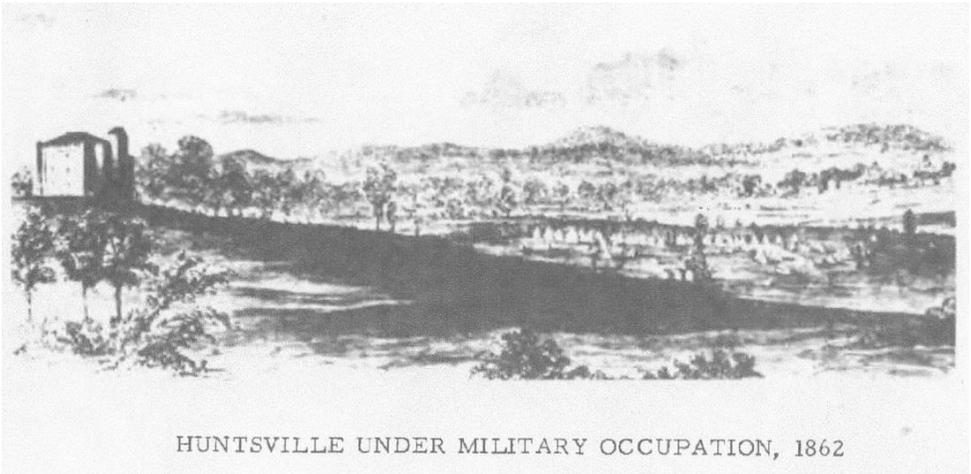
Most Huntsville women refused to socialize with the

¹² Victor B. Haagen, The Pictorial History of Huntsville (Meriden, Connecticut, 1963), 105.

¹³ Simms, op. cit., 4.

¹⁴ Mrs. William D. Chadick, "Diary of Civil War Days in Huntsville." Huntsville Times, 1934.





HUNTSVILLE UNDER MILITARY OCCUPATION, 1862

Union soldiers. There were only four or five homes in the town where the officers were received on terms of social equality. Among those who entertained the Federals were Judge and Mrs. Lane, William D. Chadick, a local citizen, said that General Mitchel complained that the ladies of Huntsville had given Federal officers the “cold shoulder” by not accepting them socially. She descried one incident in which Union sympathizers gave a picnic and invited two of Mitchel’s officers. Deeply offended, local citizens attributed the arrest to jealousy because Michel was not invited himself.

General Mitchel’s family arrived in June. Furniture,

bed. Table linens and a piano were taken from the local hotel to furnish the Clay house for their reception. Statuary and paintings were also removed from the Calhoun home to complete the furnishings. The family apparently adjusted well to Huntsville and even remained a short time following Mitchel’s departure to his new assignment.

During the summer the Federals were harassed almost constantly by small bands of Confederates scattered across North Alabama. The fighting was in the nature of skirmishes. General Philip D. Roddy, known as the “Defender of North Alabama,” led a small



body of mobile troops in guerilla type warfare to confuse and confound the enemy. The most noted leader of these hit and run activities was John Hunt Morgan, a native of Huntsville, whose raiders roamed North Alabama striking Union troops and seizing Federal mail from Huntsville to Nashville.¹⁵ Mitchel became infuriated about the Confederate guerillas and asked the War Department for permission to send prominent local Confederate sympathizers to Northern prisons. He said that Jeremiah Clemens and Judge Lane advised such a measure. Permission was given to transfer the sympathizers to Boston Harbor when Mitchel persisted in his request. General Mitchel and his subordinates held the citizens responsible for damages inflicted by Confederate forces in their section of town to bridges, trestles, and trains. As a result, the provost marshal at Huntsville, Colonel

Harmer, selected a number of prominent citizens to answer certain political questions, who, if their answers were not satisfactory, were to be expelled from the country.¹⁶

According to General Buell, habitual lawlessness prevailed in a portion of General Mitchel's command. Mitchel himself described it as "terrible outrages – robberies, rapes, arsons, and plunderings being committed by lawless brigands and vagabonds connected with the army."¹⁷ Although he was granted authority to punish the offenders by death, nobody was punished. Not only straggling individuals, but a whole brigade, under the open authority of its commander, engaged in these acts. Obviously, he could not apply the means of repression when his command was the offender and the people of the country were the innocent victims. As one local citizen recorded in her journal, "I never expected that it would

¹⁵ Chadick, op. cit.

¹⁶ ibid.

¹⁷ Fleming, op. cit., 63.



come to such a pass that we have to submit to a reign of terror. We are not allowed even to walk in the streets.”¹⁸ The terrors of the situation were compounded by the so-called “homemade” Yankees, deserters who donned blue uniforms and searched and robbed houses under Federal disguise.

From Huntsville, Federal troops fanned out in all directions to capture and fortify the area. One regiment was sent east to Bridgeport to drive the enemy out and destroy the bridge. Confederates, under General E. Kirby Smith, strongly resisted but were routed after thirty minutes of shelling, losing sixty-three men killed and many wounded. They left 300 prisoners and two pieces of artillery behind them as they fled across the Tennessee River. General Mitchel led the Federals personally in this engagement.

Mitchel reported that he could not have held the railway from Tusculumbia to Bridgeport as long as he did had it not been for negro assistance. Near Huntsville he found a negro carpenter who had worked along the entire line of the Memphis and Charleston Railroad, and knew many slaves on plantations on the railway route and Tennessee River. This man was employed to organize his slave friends into bands of informers, who were to report any hostile Confederate movements which they observed on the river and railroad. Release from slavery was promised to those who gave important information. In this way Mitchel often checked incipient movements against his posts against the information provided him by the slaves.¹⁹ On June 28, 1862, General Buell transferred his headquarters for the Army of the Ohio to Huntsville,

¹⁸ Chadick, op. cit.

¹⁹ Mrs. Chadick also mentioned in her diary that many slaves refused to work for their masters and went

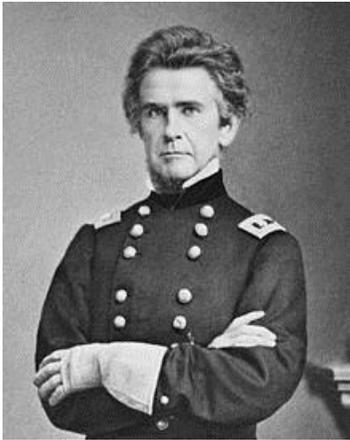
over to the Federals to provide information about Confederate arms and troops. Ibid.



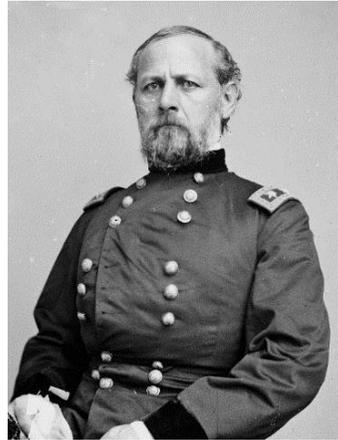
arriving there with General Alexander McCook and Richard Johnson with a part of their army. Buell intended to move to Chattanooga but he became unduly worried about his supply situation. Also, he was naturally concerned about the activities of Morgan, who had been relentlessly raiding Federal communications, although Buell's own situation was not directly affected. Nevertheless, for two weeks the Union army marked

Major General Ormsby Mcknight Mitchel; Deemed the "Ohio Monster," he was the commanding general of Union forces in Huntsville for three months during the spring of 1862. (Famous Leaders and Battle Scenes of the Civil War).

Major General Don Carlos Buell; Mitchel's commanding officer and adversary, his arrival in Huntsville in June, 1862, precipitated Mitchel's immediate resignation and reassignment to Hilton Head, South Carolina.



**Major General Ormsby
McKnight Mitchel**



**Major General
Don Carlos Buell
Commander of Army
of the Ohio and
Mitchel's Commanding
Officer.**

time in the Decatur-Huntsville area.



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(Famous Leaders and Battle Scenes of the Civil War).

During this time Buell and Mitchel engaged in sharp exchanges on military issues concerning the North Alabama campaign. Though he did not regard Mitchel as insubordinate, Buell thought him “restless in ordinary service, ambitious in an ostentatious way, and by temperament unsuited to an important independent command.”²⁰ The conflict between the two men was aggravated by Mitchel’s insistence that they move on quickly with the campaign. By reaching Chattanooga, he hoped to aid East Tennessee by destroying Confederate forces at Knoxville, Greenville, and Cumberland Gap. His plans also included destruction of the foundries at Rome, Georgia, and breaking up the railway connection between Chattanooga and Atlanta (Andres Raid). But none of these plans became reality because of Buell’s cautiousness in committing

men and arms to the campaign.

William S. Furay, a correspondent for the Cincinnati Gazette, wrote the following article from Huntsville on July 6, 1862, of the dissension between Buell and Mitchel:

God grant that he (Mitchel) may yet triumph over his enemies! I was recently inclined to think him indifferent upon the great question of Human Freedom, but I am now certain that all his seeming inconsistency upon that matter arose from the orders of General Buell, who cares more for guarding a rebel cabbage patch, or re-enslaving a liberated negro, than he does for gaining a triumph over the enemy. It is a common remark in the army now, that there is not a traitor in Huntsville or

²⁰ Johnson and Buel, op. cit., II, 707.



vicinity who would not be received at Buell's headquarters with greater consideration and respect than any Union officer.²¹

The differences between the two commanders finally resulted in Mitchel's recall to Washington where he was reassigned to the command of the Department of the South at Hilton Head, South Carolina. He assumed this command on September 17, 1862, and found the area swarming with about 5,000 disorganized and idle refugee slaves. He organized the slaves into a work force and had them build a small village called Mitchelville on the plantation of the Confederate General Thomas Drayton.

Upon completion of this project, Mitchel again turned his thoughts toward military planning, conceiving an advance on

Charleston to destroy the Charleston and Savannah Railroad near Pocotaligo. Before his plans could be completed, however he was struck with a disease similar to yellow fever. He retired to a more healthful locality in Beaufort, South Carolina, but his condition declined rapidly and he died on October 30. From Beaufort, Michel's remains were transported to Brooklyn, New York, where the body was interred in Greenwood Cemetery.



²¹ J. Cutler Andrews, The North Reports the Civil War (Pittsburgh, 1955), 287.

