

The Battle of Columbus, Georgia (April 16, 1865), was the last conflict in the Union campaign through Alabama and Georgia, known as Wilson's Raid, in the final full month of the American Civil War.

Maj. Gen. James H. Wilson had been ordered to destroy the city of Columbus as a major Confederate manufacturing center. He exploited enemy confusion when troops from both sides crowded on to the same bridge in the dark, and the garrison withheld its cannon fire. Next morning, Wilson laid waste to the city and took many prisoners.

Several authorities claim Columbus should be classified as the last battle of the Civil War, while others point to a battle which occurred after the Confederacy was vanquished, the Battle of Palmito Ranch. The Battle of Columbus is also known as the Battle of Girard, Alabama (now Phenix City).

Columbus alerted to the attack

The Confederates in Columbus were well aware that Wilson's 13,000 men were on the way. Confederate Major General Howell Cobb had been placed in charge of whatever forces he could gather, and he did his best to prepare to defend Columbus.[1]

Cobb had about 3,500 men in his forces, most of them Georgia and Alabama home guard units and civilian volunteers. On April 16, 1865, Columbus newspapers warned citizens to leave the town, since a Union attack was imminent.

“The public is hereby notified of the rapid approach of the enemy, but assured that the city of Columbus will be defended to the last. Judging from experience it is believed that the city will be shelled. Notice is, therefore, given to all non-combatants to move away immediately.”

The day after

On the morning of April 17, 1865, General Wilson ordered the destruction of all resources in Columbus that could aid the Confederate war effort. The ironclad CSS Muscogee (also known as the CSS Jackson) was burned and sunk, and the Confederate naval facility, Port Columbus, was entirely destroyed.[13] Confederates scuttled the CSS Chattahoochee to prevent it from falling into Union hands.

The Union army entirely destroyed the Confederate manufacturing facilities in both Columbus, Georgia and Girard (now Phenix City), Alabama. Collateral damage on either side of the Chattahoochee River was rather extensive as well. For days after the battle, "the flames that consumed the warehouses and factories in the Chattahoochee Valley marked the end of the war." The Union cavalry vanguard departed Columbus on the 18th of April.[13]