

Episode 236: The End Unravels
Week of April 12-April 18, 1865

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The week of April 12, 1865 was not only one of the most consequential weeks of the Civil War, but also one of the most important in United States history. Contrary to popular belief, even as late as early 1865 there was hope in the South that the Confederacy might live. By April, however, all hope in the South was gone. Sherman had long ago marched to the sea, Lee had just surrendered at Appomattox Courthouse, and Confederate president, Jefferson Davis and the rest of the Confederate government fled to Danville, Virginia. Union general, Edward Canby, and his Federal forces dug in and were poised to capture the last major city in the Deep South, Mobile, Alabama. On April 12 the city fell into the control of the Union Army. Like many Confederate commanders before him, Virginian Dabney Maury left nothing in the city for the capturing Federals, burning cotton and other useful supplies.

April 14, 1865 began in the North with such hope and celebration. Exactly four years earlier the United States Army had surrendered Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor to the newly rebelling Confederates. On this day four years later, there was a great celebration of remembrance and victory in Charleston. The event reached a crescendo when the flag of the United States was once again flying above the once defeated battery. With the demise of the Army of Northern Virginia, the advance of Sherman up the Atlantic coast, and the fall of the last Deep South stronghold, Mobile, President Lincoln looked to establish a post-war reconstruction policy that would bring the South back into the Union in an orderly fashion. These plans would be dashed on Good Friday, 1865.

On the evening of April 14, President and Mrs. Lincoln attended the comedy, *Our American Cousin*, at Ford's Theatre in Washington. The play was a favorite satire among the Washington elite. During Act III, Scene 2, of the play, a popular young Confederate-sympathizing actor, John Wilkes Booth, infamously cemented his name in American history by firing a single shot into the back of President Lincoln's head. Booth, subsequently leapt down from the Presidential box, falling to the stage and screaming "Sic Semper Tyrannis" or "Thus always to tyrants." While Booth was carrying out the crime of the century, his cohorts were attempting the other half of his dastardly plan, which included the murder of Secretary of State, William Seward, who survived a violent stabbing. The plan also included the assassination of Vice President Andrew Johnson, but the conspirator, George Atzerodt lost his nerve and Johnson's life was spared. At twenty minutes past seven the next morning, President Lincoln succumbed to his gunshot wound, and became the first American president to be assassinated while in office.

Though Lee had surrendered his army to General Grant at Appomattox on April 9, 1865, fighting continued in North Carolina between Union general William T. Sherman and Confederate general Joseph E. Johnston. On April 17, 1865, the two generals met and began negotiations for peace between their two forces at Durham Station. The two met twice on the Bennitt Farm. In the first meeting Sherman sought military terms only, while his Confederate counterpart wanted a political agreement as well. When the two met again the next day, they agreed on terms that strongly favored General Johnston and the defeated Confederates.

On Tuesday, April 18, while the body of President Lincoln lay in state in the East Room of the White House, Sherman and Johnston signed a “Memorandum of Agreement” which called for an armistice by all armies remaining in the field, for all persons to cease from war and abide by Federal authority, for the President of the United States to recognize all existing state governments when their officials took oaths to the United States, for federal officials not to disturb the people of the South as long as they lived in peace—this memorandum was in essence a general amnesty for the Confederacy!

The document became highly controversial and General Sherman was accused of usurpation of executive power and later disclaimed any attempt to set reconstruction policy.