

Episode 238: A Conflict Ends

Week of April 26-May 2, 1865

In North Carolina during the last week of April 1865 the second major rebel army surrendered, while the remnants of the Confederate government continued its flight southward. Over the next two months the remaining southern forces laid down their arms as the bloodiest and most devastating war in American history finally came to a close.

General Joseph Johnston had for ten days negotiated with Union General William T. Sherman over the surrender of his command. The two officers had first conferred on April 17 and the next day had signed a controversial agreement that was quickly repudiated by the U.S. Government because it was perceived as too lenient and having gone beyond the realm of a simple military surrender into a broader peace settlement. Furious with Secretary of War Edwin Stanton for his interference, Sherman nevertheless met again with Johnston on April 26 at Bennett Place near Durham Station, and the two generals signed a surrender agreement based on the one signed between Generals Grant and Lee on April 9. Johnston's capitulation included about 30,000 Confederate troops in the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida, leaving only southern forces in Mississippi, Alabama and the Trans-Mississippi still under arms.

On the same day that Johnston surrendered, John Wilkes Booth, the assassin of President Lincoln, was trapped by Federal cavalry in a barn in the Virginia countryside. Refusing to surrender, he was shot by one of the Union troopers and dragged from the barn, dying soon after. He was thus spared the fate of his fellow conspirators, virtually all of whom were arrested, tried by military court, and sentenced to either long prison terms or death by hanging. The latter included Mary Surratt, the first woman executed by the Federal government.

The next day a major tragedy occurred on the Mississippi River when a boiler on the steamboat *Sultana*, overloaded with recently-paroled Union soldiers returning from Confederate prisoner-of-war camps, exploded. At least 1,200 men died in the disaster. On May 4, yet another Confederate force capitulated, as General Richard Taylor surrendered the troops in the Department of Alabama, Mississippi, and East Louisiana to Federal forces under General Edward Canby. That same day far to the north the body of President Lincoln, having been conveyed to Springfield, Illinois by train, was buried in Oak Ridge Cemetery.

The next major event took place on May 10, when Confederate President Jefferson Davis was captured by Union cavalry near Irwinville, Georgia. Following the evacuation of Richmond the previous month, Davis and his cabinet had traveled first to Danville, Virginia, which for a week served as the Confederacy's last capital. Hoping to reach the Trans-Mississippi, where southern forces still resisted, Davis and his dwindling entourage traveled into North Carolina, meeting with General Johnston near Greensboro before moving on to Charlotte and ultimately to Abbeville, South Carolina. By this time he learned of the assassination of President Lincoln and of Johnston's surrender and finally came to the realization that the war was truly lost. Still, he and a small party journeyed on into south Georgia, where he was finally captured and sent to Fort Monroe, Virginia. There he remained imprisoned for two years, part of the time in chains, before being released without having stood trial for treason.

On May 12-13, the final significant combat of the Civil War took place at Palmito Ranch, Texas, when Federal forces under Colonel Theodore Barrett advanced towards Brownsville before being stopped and driven back by Confederates under Colonel John "RIP" Ford. The Federals suffered approximately 100 casualties, with most being captured. Private John J.

Williams of the Thirty-fourth Indiana Infantry is generally regarded as having the dubious distinction of being the last man killed in the war.

With active military operations winding down, a massive “Grand Review” of the victorious Union armies was held in Washington on May 23-24. In front of cheering crowds the Army of the Potomac marched through the streets of the capital the first day, followed the next day by the men of Sherman’s command. Soon the great majority of the soldiers who had won the war for the North were discharged and sent home.

Finally on June 2, the surrender of the last major Confederate army became official, when General Edmund Kirby Smith approved an agreement signed the previous week which surrendered rebel forces in the Trans-Mississippi. Nearly three weeks later in the Indian Territory, Confederate Brigadier General and Cherokee leader Stand Watie surrendered his command under the terms of Kirby Smith’s capitulation. Watie’s was the last significant Confederate force still under arms. A handful of subsequent skirmishes occurred between Federal forces and guerrillas or outlaws, but hostilities had essentially ended. A few Confederates escaped southward into Mexico, or even to Europe, but the overwhelming number grudgingly accepted the war’s verdict. The last known Confederate flag to be furled was that of the C.S.S. *Shenandoah*, a commerce raider that had been operating in the Pacific Ocean against Union whaling vessels. Not learning of the war’s end until August, its captain sailed the ship to Liverpool, England, where he surrendered to British authorities on November 6. By that time Reconstruction was underway, the Thirteenth Amendment was on the verge of ratification, and the Confederacy was but a memory.

The Civil War had devastated the country and fundamentally changed the nation’s political, economic, and social institutions. In the words of historian David Potter: “Slavery was

dead; secession was dead; and six hundred thousand [Americans] were dead. That was the basic balance sheet of the sectional conflict.” We still deal with its legacy today.

This is David Coles, and with this final episode of “That a Nation Might Live,” I’d like to thank you for listening for the past four and a half years. I’d also like to thank the students in several of my history classes for assisting in the preparation of the texts for a number of these podcasts. So, until the start of the Civil War Bicentennial in 2061, this is “That a Nation Might Live” signing off for the last time.