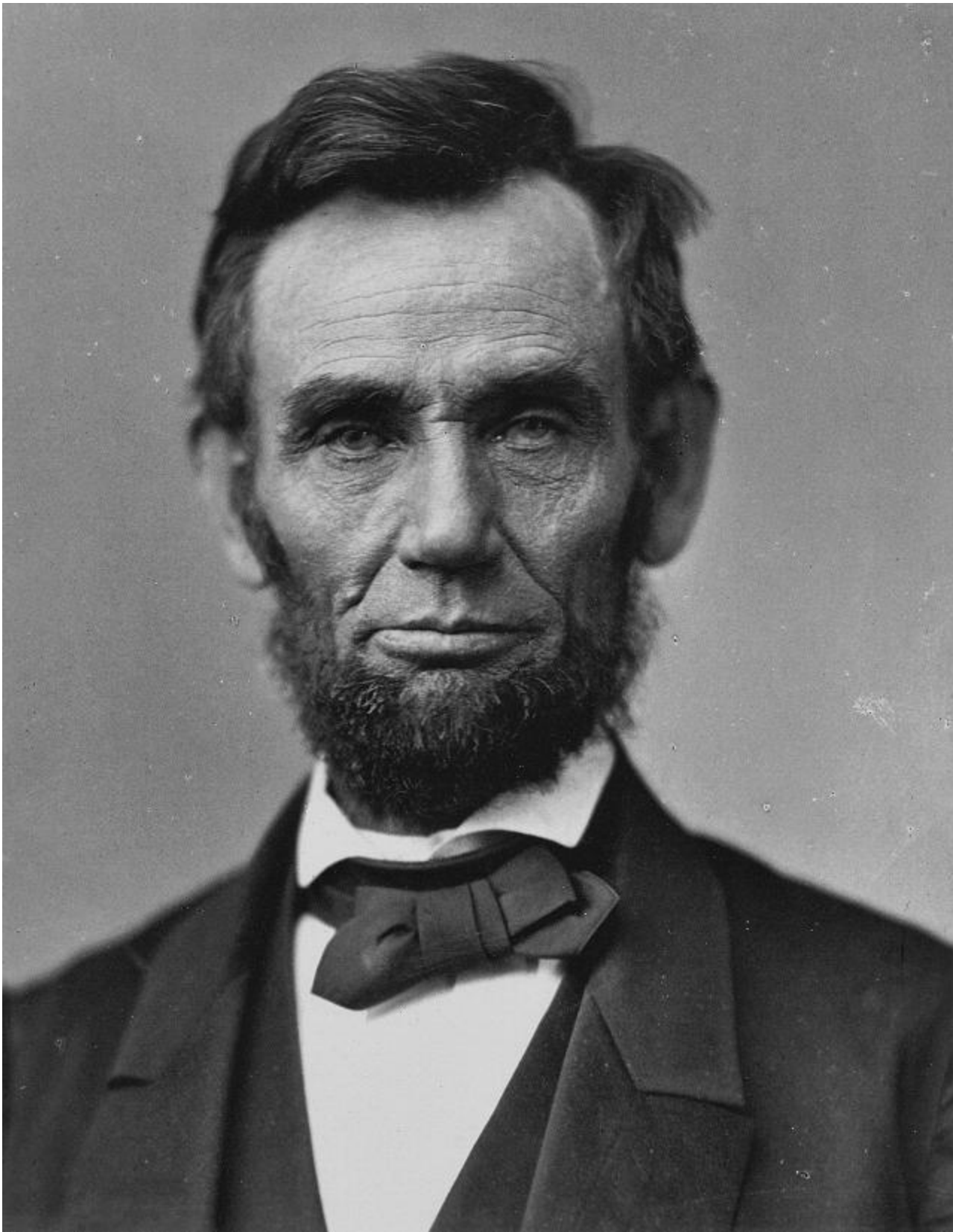




Sherman Offered City to Lincoln as Christmas Gift

by Tom Emery
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When you do your Christmas shopping, what do you give the man who has everything?
How about an entire city?

At Christmas 1864, William T. Sherman did just that for President Abraham Lincoln at the conclusion of his destructive March to the Sea. The general offered the key port city of Savannah, Ga. as a Christmas present to Lincoln, a holiday tidings that has become a part of Civil War lore.

Sherman's five-week march from Atlanta to Savannah that fall is considered a decisive blow by modern historians, but the movement was highly risky. The high command in Washington was concerned with Sherman's plan, as he wanted to advance deep into enemy territory without a supply line or communications.

As a result, Lincoln and other Union authorities were uncertain as to Sherman's exact location for about a month. "When someone asked Lincoln about Sherman's progress, he shrugged and said, 'I know where he went in at, but I can't tell what hole he will come out of,'" said Dr. Samuel Wheeler, a research historian at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield, Ill. "When Lincoln received word that Sherman had indeed been successful, his relief must have been enormous."

Wheeler also notes that the fall of 1864 had been "exceptionally tense" for Lincoln, in part because of a stressful re-election campaign. "He went through an excruciating period in the run-up to the election of 1864, and shared the popular opinion that he would not be re-elected," said Wheeler. "After the election, all eyes turned toward bringing the war to a conclusion. That, of course, brought a whole new series of anxieties."

Sherman's 62,000 men left for the sea on November 15 with twenty days of rations and, when those were exhausted, lived off the land. He moved rapidly through Georgia with little opposition, but as he approached Savannah and its rich stores, food and other supplies were running alarmingly low. A prolonged battle for the city posed a threat to the army's survival.

Fortunately for Sherman, the outnumbered Confederate garrison withdrew, and the city surrendered on December 21. He was shortly visited by a U.S. Treasury agent, A. G. Browne, who was on the scene to claim the cotton, rice, and government buildings.

Known for his hatred of bureaucrats, Sherman curtly refused Browne's demands. Avoiding a confrontation, the agent sidestepped the issue with a diplomatic suggestion — that Sherman offer the city as a Christmas present to Lincoln. Saying that "the President particularly enjoys such pleasantries," Browne further noted that a message could be telegraphed from a nearby communications hub for receipt by Lincoln on Christmas Eve.

Sherman accepted Browne's advice and dashed off a brief message that read, "I beg to present to you as a Christmas gift, the city of Savannah." Ever practical, Sherman added that the city came with "one hundred and fifty heavy guns and plenty of ammunition, also about twenty-five thousand bales of cotton."

Lincoln received the wire on December 24. The telegram captured the imagination of the nation was reprinted in major newspapers, including page one of the New York Times, with the subhead "Sherman's Christmas Present."

"Lincoln was very pleased to receive his 'Christmas gift' from Sherman," remarked Wheeler. "It was probably the best gift Lincoln could have received that year."

On the day after Christmas, Lincoln wrote Sherman with "many, many thanks for your Christmas gift" and conceded that he "was anxious, if not fearful" of the general's march from Atlanta. But, "the undertaking being a success," Lincoln offered the glory to his general, writing "the honor is all yours."

"Lincoln was not interested in receiving individual credit," commented Wheeler. "There's an old saying, 'it's amazing what you can accomplish if you don't care who gets the credit.' I think Lincoln's management of his generals personifies that statement."

The men of Sherman's army celebrated Christmas in the rain in Savannah. After hearing a congratulatory order from their commander, they were dismissed for dinner, an undertaking enjoyed by some more than others. William Humphrey of Jacksonville, Ill., the fife major of the 101st Illinois, wrote that his Christmas meals were "breakfast, rice, and beef. Dinner, rice. Supper, beef and rice."

Others had it better, though with equally limited selection. Men of the 16th Illinois Cavalry feasted on oyster soup, oysters on the half-shell, fried oysters, roast oysters, roast goose, rice, raisins, and coffee with condensed milk.

The Christmas season of 1864 would prove to be the last in the field in the Civil War, as the Southern armies surrendered the following spring. Sherman's present of Savannah has become a hallmark of the smashing success of his march to the sea, though the general has been roundly criticized in some circles for forcing the war on the Southern people.

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