

"Let us destroy Atlanta and make it a desolation":  
Sherman's Artillery Bombardment of Atlanta,  
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ABSTRACT

In late July 1864, Union Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman's Federal armies began a semi-siege of Atlanta, defended by the Confederate Army of Tennessee under Gen. John B. Hood. Sherman's goal was to force Hood to evacuate Atlanta by cutting the Rebels' railroad supply lines into the city. With his troops entrenched around the northern outskirts of Atlanta, engaging Hood's fortified troops with daily skirmishing, probing infantry advances and front-line cannon fire, Sherman also ordered a sustained bombardment of Atlanta. the thirty-six day shelling, which opened July 20, sent thousands of Union projectiles—solid shot (some heated to start fires), ten-, twenty-, and thirty-three pound exploding shells—raining down upon the city. Although the Union gunners' targets frequently seemed to be the railway depots and roundhouse in the center of Atlanta, all the city came under fire, with residence, churches, stores and other buildings sustaining structural damage.

Confederate newspapers, a neglected source for historians of the Atlanta Campaign, provide significant information both on damage to buildings and on civilian casualties. Interestingly, Sherman was able to stay informed on the destructive work of his guns not only through these papers, but also through signal officers' observations and reports from spies in the city.

The absence of medical or burial records during the "siege" prevent an accurate counting of the number of Atlantans killed or maimed by the Yankee shells. Confederate newspaper reports and scattered diaries or letters suggest that the number of deaths may be quite low, perhaps a score or so lives. Most of the city's population, estimated at 20,000 in the spring of '64, had fled the city by the time the Union artillery opened fire. Those who remained during the bombardment took cover in cellars and specially built backyard "bombproof."

Sherman was aware that artillery alone would not force Hood's Confederate army evacuate Atlanta. The chief Federal goal of the bombardment seems therefore to have been a general demoralization of the enemy. In this regard, however, there is no evidence to suggest that the Northern shelling weakened the Confederate army's hold on the city, or shortened the campaigns. Sherman also desired his gunfire to disrupt the Southerners' supply system, but the evidence suggest Hood's men received slim but sufficient rations and ammunition replenishment even during the bombardment's peak intensity. Shelling the city thus hastened the evacuation of Atlanta's panicked inhabitants, but it did not affect the Confederate army's defensive strength.

In the end, Sherman captured Atlanta by giving up his siege lines on the night of August 25-26 and swinging the bulk of his army southward to Jonesboro, where the Federal cut the Macon & Western Railroad, Hood's last major supply line.

Confederates therefore might have been justified in calling the bombardment just another "Yankee humbug." Surely they were justified in calling it, as did Atlanta Civilian Samuel Richards, "a very barbarous mode of war."