

2400 words

The Confederate Terror Attack on New York City

By Duane Schultz

“One of the most fiendish and inhuman acts known in modern times.”

---*The New York Times*

The first fire was set in room 204 at the luxurious 300-room Astor House Hotel on Park Row at 8:00 PM on Friday, November 25, 1864, by 23-year-old Lt. John Headley, who had once ridden with the Confederate raider John Hunt Morgan.

“After lighting the gas jet,” Headley wrote years later, in 1906, “I hung the bedclothes loosely on the headboard and piled the chairs, drawers of the bureaus and [wooden] washstand on the bed. Then stuffed some newspapers about among the mass and poured a bottle of turpentine over it all.”

Then he calmly chose one of the ten 4-ounce bottles he had brought with him. They contained what was called “Greek fire,” a deadly mix of chemicals including sulfur, naphtha and quicklime. This combustible concoction, first used by the Greeks at Constantinople in the seventh century A.D., ignited spontaneously when exposed to air.

“I opened a bottle carefully and quickly spilled it on the pile of rubbish. It blazed up instantly and the whole bed seemed to be in flames before I could get out.”

But he did get out, and so did the five other Confederate agents who, at the same moment, were setting fires in other New York City hotels. By 8:45 that night, the city was in pandemonium. Headley recalled: “[I]t seemed that a hundred bells were ringing, great crowds were gathering on the street, and there was general consternation.”

Some 19 hotels were aflame, along with P. T. Barnum's 6-story "American Museum" near the Astor Hotel. The museum, the home of exotic animals and curiosities, advertised itself as housing "Three Giants 24 Feet High, Two Dwarfs Weighing 17 Pounds Each, Indian Warriors, Kangaroos, Ned the Learned Seal and a Menagerie of 50 Other Living Animals." They also had a pair of Beluga whales.

Scores of people ran out of the building screaming in terror. Others leaned out of upper-story windows as firemen raced to put up ladders to rescue them. Headley was surprised to see the museum on fire. It had not been one of the targets, but he learned later that one of the other agents, Captain Robert Cobb Kennedy, still limping from his wound at Shiloh, had tossed a bottle of Greek fire inside the open door after stopping at a saloon for a quick drink. As Headley reported, Kennedy thought "it would be fun to start a scare. He broke a bottle of Greek fire . . . on the edge of a step like he would crack an egg. It blazed up and he got out to witness the result."

Headley continued walking down Broadway, past the finest stores in the city—Lord & Taylor, Tiffany, and Brooks Brothers—until he reached the North River Wharf where he tossed more of his bottles of liquid fire onto the decks of hay barges and larger boats. No one took notice of him amidst the chaos. He made his way back toward Barnum's museum and saw flames near the Winter Garden Theater, which was packed with an audience of more than 2000 watching *Julius Caesar*, a play about assassination, starring the three immensely popular Booth brothers, appearing together on stage together for the first time. (The play was a benefit performance to raise funds for a statue of Shakespeare in Central Park, which still stands today.)

Edwin Booth kept the audience from panicking. They heard the clanging of fire bells and the firemen rushing into the lobby yelling "Fire!" But Booth quietly assured them that there was

nothing to be concerned about; surely the fire was minor and confined to the Lafarge House hotel next door. The play went on.

Their mother was in the audience and she later wrote that she had a premonition that her youngest son, John Wilkes, who was playing Marc Antony, had some sort of unknown danger hovering over him. Friends had noticed that he had become preoccupied, no longer the same contented person he had once been. Two days later, while having breakfast at Edwin's home, John Wilkes defended the attempt to burn down the city as justified retribution for the destruction the Yankees had caused in the South. Edwin, a strong supporter of Lincoln and the war, accused him of treasonous thoughts and told him to never speak that way in his house again. Only a few months later, John Wilkes Booth acted on his anger, with tragic results.

Amazingly, the only casualties from fires in more than a dozen hotels and other locations were the two whales in the aquarium at Barnum's museum, which boiled in their tank. None of the buildings sustained significant damage. The total cost of the fires was estimated at \$422,000, equivalent to some \$6 million today.

The extent of the attack was nowhere near the scope of the original plan, which initially was supposed to have been carried out three weeks previously. That scheme, developed by Lt. Col. Robert Martin, who had also ridden with Morgan's Raiders, called for setting hotels and venues in the city on fire on November 8, Election Day, while simultaneously attacking City Hall, major police stations, and Union Army installations. They were certain that by the end of the day they would be able to raise the Confederate flag over the city.

Their objective was first, to overwhelm the local fire departments, but more importantly, to bring down the government of Abraham Lincoln and end the war, with the aid and support of the Sons of Liberty, an anti-war protest group known for its violent actions. The group was scheduled to hold a convention in New York on Election Day. Their leaders had agreed to

Martin's request for help; they expected up to 20,000 armed members to attend. They would attack the police stations and army installations while the Confederate agents created chaos by setting fires.

The Sons of Liberty was one of a number of anti-war groups that collectively came to be known as Copperheads. Typically, these were men angry with what they saw as Lincoln's assumption of dictatorial powers, such as suspending the writ of *habeas corpus*, having anti-war dissidents confined in military prisons, pressuring newspapers not to publish articles critical of the war, and instituting a draft system that allowed a man to pay a substitute to serve for him. Protestors argued that only the poor were doing the fighting and dying.

Many anti-war protestors were also angry about Lincoln's 1862 Emancipation Proclamation, which they believed made the war about freeing the slaves rather than about preserving the Union. Many people in the North were not willing to see more of their sons die for what they called "the Negro Cause." They did not want Negroes, as Black or African-American people were called then, moving into their neighborhoods and taking their jobs.

In both Union and Confederate states, people were tired of the lengthy and costly war. Horace Greeley, influential editor of the *New-York Tribune*, echoed the thoughts of many of his readers when he wrote to the president: "Our bleeding, bankrupt, almost dying country longs for peace—shudders at the prospect of fresh conscriptions, of further wholesale devastations and of new rivers of human blood."

The Sons of Liberty members who were meeting in New York City were prepared to take action to prevent Abraham Lincoln from winning another term. Lincoln's opponent in that election, Gen. George McClellan, was believed to be likely to negotiate a peace treaty with the Confederates.

Robert Martin, John Headley and six other Confederate agents arrived in New York several days before the target date of Tuesday, November 8. They each registered at three different hotels under assumed names and pretended to be tourists exploring the city.

Martin and Headley did not know that they and their accomplices were under surveillance by federal agents from the moment they disembarked from their trains. However, after two days of following them, the Union agents concluded that the men were harmless visitors and called off their surveillance. Headley wrote that “they had finally abandoned us as a lot of well-behaved young men who simply seemed to be enjoying ourselves.”

Two days before the attack, Headley looked out the window of his room at the Fifth Avenue Hotel, a luxury establishment between 23rd and 24th streets. It was one of the three hotels at which he had registered, and was shocked to see Union troops marching up Broadway. Before the day was out, Headley and the others read in the newspapers that some 5000 troops had been sent to the city because of rumors that there was to be an attempt by Confederate guerillas to set important buildings afire.

The troops were led by General Ben Butler, known to Southerners as “Beast Butler” because of the harsh punishment he meted out to those who acted against the Union. If Martin, Headley, and the others were caught, Butler would hang them. And Butler was staying in the Fifth Avenue Hotel, one floor below the rooms of the Confederate agents.

The sudden appearance so many Yankee soldiers dampened the ardor of the Sons of Liberty. They immediately cancelled their convention, along with their plans to attack the city. After much persuasion, they agreed, albeit reluctantly, to reschedule their attack for November 25, but as that date got closer they canceled again and told the Confederate agents that they would have nothing more to do with them, even though General Butler and his Union troops had left the city on November 15 to return to the front.

Though disappointed by the decision of the Sons of Liberty, Martin and Headley decided to activate their original plan to set fires in as many locations as they could. From a contact associated with the Sons of Liberty, they obtained the name of a retired druggist who could supply the Greek fire, so they went to his laboratory in the basement of a building on the west side of Washington Square and picked up 144 bottles of the deadly product.

At six o'clock on the evening of November 25, the conspirators met at a small cottage in Central Park, which Martin had rented to serve as their headquarters. However, he and Headley grew worried when two others did not show up at the appointed time. It turned out they had second thoughts about the operation and decided not to participate. The immediate concern for Martin and Headley was that if the deserters had been arrested, they might reveal the plan.

Despite that potential danger, Martin decided to proceed. And in the end they succeeded in creating chaos but they did not do nearly as much damage to the hotels and other properties as they hoped. Part of the problem was that they failed to open windows and doors in their hotel rooms, so there was not sufficient oxygen to feed the fires. They also suspected that the druggist had diluted the bottles of Greek fire, perhaps to make a greater profit on the deal, or possibly at the request of the Sons of Liberty, who having decided not to participate, wanted to limit the damage. The less damage, the fewer harsh retaliatory measures the Union would institute against the Copperheads and other anti-war groups.

Whatever the explanations, Martin and Headley were disappointed in the results of their operation. On the day after Thanksgiving, the six Confederate agents went to retrieve their luggage, being held at a piano store at 358 Broadway that was owned by a Sons of Liberty sympathizer. As they neared the shop, the owner's daughter ran out and warned them that her father was being arrested at that very moment. Had they continued to the store, they would have been caught themselves.

They walked on to Carter's Restaurant at Union Square where they took separate tables; Martin and Headley sat together. While drinking his coffee, Headley picked up a newspaper and was surprised to read the lead story, giving their names, descriptions, and details of their operation. He passed the paper on to Martin. He whispered, "Good God, they know all about us."

The Confederate conspirators, armed with revolvers hidden in their coat pockets, left New York City in pairs on a train heading north to Toronto at 11 o'clock on the night of November 27, certain that every man they saw around the train station was a Union agent hunting them. And many Federals were indeed out scanning the streets and railway stations, now that they knew what the Confederates looked like. But no one spotted the fugitives and two days later they safely crossed the border into Canada.

They had survived, but the hunt for them grew more intense. Soon a reward of \$25,000 was offered for information leading to the arrest of any of the plotters. The only one captured, perhaps a victim of his own tendency to boast about his role in the attack, was 29-year-old Robert Cobb Kennedy who was arrested in a railway station in Detroit when he tried to cross the border from Canada into the United States. He was brought to trial in New York, and sentenced to be hanged.

The presiding judge at Kennedy's military trial, General John Adams Dix, pronounced the plan to set fire to New York as "one of the greatest atrocities of the age. There is nothing in the annals of barbarism which evinces greater vindictiveness." Kennedy was hanged at Fort Lafayette in New York Harbor on March 25, 1865.

History has recorded two versions of Kennedy's last words. In the more prim and proper version, as the noose was placed around his neck, he allegedly said in a firm and proud voice, "I die like a Southern officer and a gentleman. I do not regret the road I have followed."

In the other version, Kennedy yelled, “I say, Colonel, can’t you give me a drink before I swing off?” The colonel turned away without answering and Kennedy started singing an Irish drinking song.

“Trust to luck. Trust to Luck, Stare Fate in the face,
For your heart will be easy, If it’s in the right place.”

Whichever version is the more historically accurate, Captain Robert Kennedy was the last Confederate soldier to be executed by the Union in the American Civil War, which ended 15 days later.

About the author

Duane Schultz has written numerous articles and books on military history, including *The Dahlgren Affair: Terror and Conspiracy in the Civil War* and *The Fate of War: Fredericksburg, 1862*. For more information see www.duaneschultz.com.

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