

Turchin was told “Don’t leave a grease spot” in 1862 Athens

By Rebekah Davis
Limestone County Archivist

Note: As part of the Limestone County Bicentennial Celebration, members of the Limestone County Bicentennial Committee are creating a video for each historic marker in Limestone County, telling more of the story behind each landmark location, and featuring historic photos of the sties and people for which the place is renowned. These videos will be available on the Limestone County YouTube channel and social media pages in 2018. This is the story behind the “Athens Sacked and Plundered” marker on the Limestone County Courthouse lawn.

When Alabama seceded from the Union in 1861, Limestone County was still so overwhelmingly against secession that they kept the Union flag flying over the courthouse for two months before taking it down in what Athens Mayor W.P. Tanner called a “peace measure.”

But the peace in this little town was shattered on May 1, 1862, when Confederate troops, aided by Limestone residents, clashed with Union troops who had taken the town just days before, driving them back to Huntsville and even crashing a Union train by burning out the trestle over Limestone Creek. In retaliation, General Ormsby Mitchel sent troops the next day, under the command of Russian native and Union Colonel John Basil Turchin, back to Athens to drive out the Confederate forces, telling them, “Don’t leave a grease spot. Don’t leave a post standing.”

Turchin’s troops routed the Confederates, and then Turchin reportedly sat down on the north steps of the courthouse and told his troops, “I see nothing for two hours.” That’s all the time it took for Union troops to plunder and pillage the town.

According to later testimony, they raped a young female slave in Charlotte Hine’s home, plundered businesses and homes all over town, and even scared a pregnant Mrs. Hollingsworth so badly she miscarried and died. They took surgical instruments from Dr. Sowell, dental instruments from William Allen’s drugstore, and all the money out of the iron safes at the stores run by John Turrentine, George Peck, and Peterson Tanner and Sons. At R.C. David’s office, they destroyed and trampled a collection of Bibles, and at Haywood Jones’ house, they cut bacon on the parlor carpets and chopped joints on the piano with an axe.

Turchin was court martialled for the sack of Athens and on July 30, 1862, he was found guilty of neglect of duty, conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman, and disobedience of orders. However, his wife Nadine had already persuaded President Lincoln to promote Turchin to brigadier general on July 17, so not only was his conviction invalidated, the promotion helped prompt the Union’s strategy change from conciliation with the South to punishment for Confederate civilians who resisted Northern troops. Turchin resigned his commission in 1864 due to failing health, and in 1901, he died in the Southern Illinois Hospital for the Insane.

Marker Text

Athens Sacked and Plundered: On May 2, 1862, Union troops of the 19th and 24th Illinois and the 37th Indian Regiments commanded by Col. John Basil Turchin went on a rampage through the town. They looted and plundered stores and homes, stealing clothing, jewelry and anything of value, destroying what they didn't want. For months afterward, the soldiers stabled their horses in some of the town's churches,

burned the pews for firewood and destroyed the interiors. Col Turchin, born Ivan Vasillevich Turchinoff in Russia, was court martialed in Huntsville for encouraging these actions, but his wife appealed to Abraham Lincoln for clemency on his behalf. Turchin was promoted to Brig Gen. one day before the court martial.

Marker at the intersection of South Jefferson Street and West Washington Street, Athens. GPS

Coordinates: 34.80245, -86.972

About the Archives:

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