

## Chapter 7

THE GREATEST CALAMITY  
THAT EVER BEFELL OUR CITY*Mocksville to Salisbury: April 12–13, 1865*

From the shade of her porch, nineteen-year-old Elizabeth Frost Cain gazed toward the stable. She had no desire to step out into the hot April sun, but she had work to do. “I had just pulled on my bonnet,” she recalled years later, “when I noticed a light a flashin’ in the sun.” A slave accompanied Elizabeth to the edge of the woods for a closer look. “Then we were able to discern a cloud of dust and realized it was some one or some people on horse back, and saw that it was a considerable group,” she wrote. “I recollect my first thought: ‘Company and the house in a mess.’” But Elizabeth’s slave, Elminy, understood quicker. “Oh, good Lord Jesus, Miss Lizzy,” she cried. “Dat aint no company. Dems . . .” Elminy didn’t finish. Rather, she ran off yelling, “Git in dat house.” Elizabeth lingered, her gaze held by sunlight glinting on polished steel.

When the spell broke, Elizabeth ran after Elminy. Reaching the house, which was located near Cana, North Carolina, she beheld a knot of Federal cavalrymen. “I recollect how the horses hoof[s] clop clopped across the stones, and the dust as the men trotted up into the yard, all bearded and dusty, and I recall how I thought, ‘Why they look just like anyone else,’” she wrote. Three soldiers

dismounted in the yard. Three others headed to the stables. Other raiders went into the house and ripped open a mattress, spilling feathers everywhere. One tow-headed trooper found some goose eggs and ordered Elminy to boil them. When the party finally left, Elminy started laughing so hard that tears came to her eyes. The eggs, she smiled, were rotten!<sup>1</sup>

The foraging soldiers, members of either Brown's or Miller's brigades, meanwhile rejoined the cavalry column careering south from Shallow Ford. The troopers had left the ford on the afternoon of April 11 after resting a few hours at Huntsville. They were bound for Salisbury. Grant had anticipated this moment. "[After Greensboro, Stoneman] might also be able to return to East Tennessee by way of Salisbury, N.C., thus releasing some of our prisoners of war in rebel hands," he noted. Stoneman thought capturing Salisbury's prisoner-of-war camp would redeem his reputation.<sup>2</sup>

Gillem pushed the men hard. In 1862, he had led a sixty-mile march in thirty-six hours. Now, Stoneman wanted a similar pace. Still, the visit to the Cains was typical. As the column moved, troopers rode afield to find food, forage, and mounts. They would close up only as the column neared a fortified or garrisoned point. One of those points was the town of Mocksville, which the column now approached. Mocksville's citizens had recently debated the "condition of the country" and passed resolutions that reaffirmed their support for the Confederacy.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps these resolutions led citizens to resist the raiders. More likely, it was an accident. On April 11, townspeople heard that a small squad of bushwhackers was lurking nearby. Major A. A. Harbin's Third Home Guard Battalion responded. Less than two dozen men, including a fifteen-year-old boy and several old men, took position on a hill outside Mocksville. Spotting Stoneman's advance, the Home Guardsmen fired several shots. When the raiders returned fire, the Home Guardsmen realized their mistake and scattered. Signalman Frank Frankenberry was riding with the division's advance guard. "Bang! Bang! That was a musket, and there came the sharp report of our own guns," Frankenberry recalled. "I was up near the front and away we went in a charge. The 'Home Guards' fled and we push[ed] on[,] came to Mocksville and charge[d] into the town." Gillem reported the incident, too. "When near Mocksville the advance guard came upon a small party of the enemy, which was at once charged and dispersed," he wrote.<sup>4</sup>

Some of the cavalrymen swore they would burn the village in retaliation,

but it proved a hollow threat. Only Thomas McNeely's cotton mill, which had not operated since the 1840s, went up in flames. Stoneman's troopers were more interested in finding food. They pressed the people of Mocksville into preparing meals. The women boiled shoulders and hams in a big iron wash pot and served officers in dining rooms and troops on the lawns. One black cook was so unnerved by the experience that she put too much saleratus, or baking soda, in her biscuits. They came out of the oven with an ugly yellow-and-green hue.<sup>5</sup>

That afternoon, the town fairly swarmed with Northern soldiers, some of whom misbehaved. "There were a dozen awful things that set did. Why recall them?" wrote a citizen. "There was so much sadness in the memory of those days that Mother seldom spoke of them."<sup>6</sup> Whatever the truth of the raiders' activities, Stoneman paused at Mocksville for only a short time. He was anxious to press on to Salisbury. Resuming the march late that afternoon, the column finally bivouacked around nine in the evening near Ephesus, just twelve miles from Salisbury. Signalman Frankenberry, who knew it would be a brief halt, had to take care of business. "I came to a darkey and told him to hand me the best horse or mule in the stable," he wrote. Later, Frankenberry bedded down. "To move at midnight [we would have] only 2½ hours to sleep[,] so let us be at it as I slept but little last night." The troopers camped along Whetstone Branch and wondered what the next day would bring. A member of the Eleventh Michigan predicted, "Expect a fight tomorrow morning."<sup>7</sup>



"I consider that the greatest man who ever lived was he who invented sleep," George Stoneman once wrote. But at midnight on April 12, Salisbury was more important to him than sleep. In a few hours, he would capture the prize and redeem himself. "I waked up just before midnight," signalman Frankenberry recalled, "and find the column moving out[,] saddl[ing] up and away we go to the front. Dark and muddy." Miller's Tennessee brigade took the lead. A moon just a few days past full lit the landscape.<sup>8</sup>

Some temptations lay between Mocksville and Salisbury. The juiciest target, the impressive Cooleemee Plantation, sat on the west bank of the Yadkin ten miles from Mocksville. It was the home of Peter Hairston, one of the largest slave owners in the South and a cousin of late Confederate major general J. E. B. Stuart. The raiders had already encountered Hairston's coachman, John Goolsby, in

Stokes County. This night, however, they ignored the plantation. Its only loss was a slave. A note in Cooleemee's records reads simply, "Henry ran away."<sup>9</sup>

The South Yadkin River blocked the raiders' approach to Salisbury. Gillem reported that the river was "a deep and rapid stream with but few fords." One such crossing was the Point Ferry, which proved to be a dead end. Raiders discovered that the ferry lines had been cut and that the water was too deep. That left the Halle Ford as the best way over the South Yadkin. Gillem assumed the river would be defended, but it was not. Approaching the ford, the raiders encountered a few enemy soldiers milling around the north bank, but they disappeared without firing a shot. The column then crossed the South Yadkin. While standing on a fence rail beside his horse, one Federal watched his fellow cavalymen ford the river. When his turn came, it was easier than he expected. "Cross over and fail to get wet," he wrote. Then the advance resumed in earnest. "March lively," he wrote. It was about two o'clock in the morning.<sup>10</sup>

About a quarter-mile beyond the river, the raiders came to a fork. The main road was newer, better, and led directly to Salisbury. The other route, the old Mocksville road, offered a rougher, more circuitous course—and a tactical opportunity. Stoneman and Gillem suspected that defenders waited at Grant's Creek, the next natural obstruction en route to Salisbury. The two roads crossed Grant's Creek within a half-mile of each other, so the commanders decided to take advantage of the old road and launch a two-pronged attack. Gillem ordered one battalion of the Twelfth Kentucky Cavalry to take the old eastern road. Its job, Gillem reported, was "to make a determined demonstration of crossing Grant's Creek two miles from Salisbury, and if successful to attack the forces defending the upper bridge in the rear." D. H. Baker of the Twelfth Kentucky rode with the flankers, who moved after taking a break. "We dismounted, and the tired men and horses rested until near daybreak when we mounted and moved up near town," he wrote.<sup>11</sup>

The main body marched on. As daylight arrived—sunrise was at 5:53 A.M. that day—the blue column crested a gentle hill overlooking the valley of Grant's Creek. Advance troopers ran into enemy pickets and pushed them back. Once the pickets withdrew, the Confederate defenses were revealed; the Salisbury side of the stream bristled with the enemy in a position of strength rarely encountered on the raid. Confederate artillery and small arms opened up. The Battle of Salisbury had begun.<sup>12</sup>