



Robert Cobb Kennedy three days before his execution at Fort Lafayette in New York Harbor. He sent copies of this photograph to his family in Louisiana. Courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. W. A. LaFleur.

The Man
Who Tried To
BURN
NEW YORK



Nat Brandt

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY PRESS 1986

A. S. Cook Library
Towson State University
Towson, Maryland 21204

*You tol' me to preach,
You tol' me to preach,
I done done,
I done done,
You tol' me to preach
An' I done done what you tol' me to do.*

*You tol' me to shout,
I done done,
You tol' me to shout,
I done done,
You tol' me to shout,
An' I done done what you tol' me to do.*

*You tol' me to moan,
I done done,
You tol' me to moan,
I done done,
You tol' me to moan,
An' I done done what you tol' me to do.*

chapter 8

The Confederate defeat at Gettysburg on the eastern front and the fall of Vicksburg in the west during the first week of July, 1863, dramatically altered the war. Within a few months, what Southern hopes remained in the west were dashed at Chattanooga. Finally, in March of 1864, Grant's appointment as commander of all Union armies doomed Lee in the east.

The Richmond government, plagued by growing shortages of men, arms, and food and unable to win on the battlefield, reacted by trying to terrorize the North into peace and by fostering revolution. Its most important effort was a conspiracy to tear the Union apart by teaming up with Northern Copperheads—the so-called Peace Democrats, who despised Lincoln and sought peace at any price. They had organized chapters in almost every state in the North, identifying themselves at various times as Knights of the Golden Circle, the Order of American Knights, and the Sons of Liberty. Many of the members in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Kentucky were of Southern background. The most prominent Copperhead, Clement L. Vallandigham, even ran for Governor of Ohio in absentia while in exile in Canada—backed by Southern funds.

In the spring of 1864, several weeks after Grant's appointment, Jefferson Davis commissioned three men to carry out Confederate designs across the Union's weakest frontier: the more than 1,000-mile border with Canada. Canadian neutrality was to be respected and every diplomatic means of gaining peace exhausted, but—Davis said—military operations were to be carried out from Canada as a last resort.

Heading the mission to Canada was Colonel Jacob Thompson, a former aide to General P. G. T. Beauregard who before the war had

been a congressman from Mississippi and secretary of the interior in Buchanan's cabinet. Thompson was obstinate, unimaginative, easily influenced.

The second commissioner was an Alabamian who was as gullible as Thompson, Clement C. Clay. Clay, a one-time United States Senator, was chronically ill, virtually an invalid.

Thompson and Clay met the third commissioner on their arrival in Canada. Scholarly, detached, James P. Holcombe, a former professor of law at the University of Virginia, always carried a book of poems. He was already busy helping escaped prisoners of war find their way back to the Confederacy. The favorite route was by neutral mail ship from Halifax, Nova Scotia, to Bermuda, then by blockade runner into Wilmington, North Carolina.

Assigned to handle the military side of their operations was a cavalryman whose effeminate appearance belied his audacity. Captain Thomas H. Hines, a Kentuckian who had served with the famed raider John Hunt Morgan, was helping Holcombe round up Morgan's men and other escaped prisoners. However, Hines intended to enlist them for raids against the North from Canada.

In addition, a number of other individuals of doubtful talents and loyalties gathered about the commissioners. Clay, the second commissioner, put his trust in debonair George N. Sanders. Sanders, who had been American consul in England in the 1850s, was an opportunist and influence peddler. He was constantly prodding Clay to underwrite raids on Northern banks and trains.

Thompson's "intimate counselor" was a former Union sutler who had fled to Canada after turning informer, William L. (Larry) McDonald.¹ McDonald, who was from New York City, was a notorious schemer. In his spare time, he manufactured torpedoes, grenades, and other weapons.

Thompson also had great faith in a shadowy figure named Godfrey J. Hyams, who was privy to all the group's clandestine operations and often served as a courier. A former Little Rock, Arkansas, politician, Hyams managed to keep secret his own hostility toward officials in Richmond because he had been passed over for promotion while in the Confederate army.

Discord broke out as soon as Thompson and Clay reached Canada, and the two men soon went their separate ways. Clay, with Sanders at his side, stayed in Montreal with the nearly \$100,000 in funds that Thompson had given him. Thompson set up his headquar-

ters in Toronto, appointing a Kentuckian, William C. Cleary, as the commission's secretary. Holcombe left Canada altogether within a few months.

The commissioners remained in contact with Richmond by means of techniques that ranged from the sophisticated to the juvenile. Messages were often encoded or written in "imperceptible" ink between the lines of innocent-looking letters. Microphotography was sometimes employed to enable couriers to carry messages inside metal suit buttons. Cryptic advertisements were run in certain Northern newspapers that were available in Richmond. Confederate officials there, in turn, ran personals in the Richmond papers with the addendum, "New York papers please copy." The personals were invariably reprinted by such anti-Administration papers as *The New York Daily News*.

The couriers sent to Richmond used forged papers to enter the United States, then passed through Baltimore and Washington before slipping across the Potomac at night to enter into the Confederate lines.² Clay and Thompson used a variety of such couriers: Hyams, a prostitute named Annie Davis, a man named Douglass among others. At least one of them was in the pay of the War Department in Washington, where the letters were steamed open, copied, carefully resealed, and then given back to the courier for delivery in Richmond. The same procedure was being followed with messages coming from Richmond.

Canada was decidedly pro-Southern, albeit officially neutral, when Thompson and Clay first arrived there. Toronto itself was full of Southern refugees—Kentuckians, Missourians, Marylanders, and Virginians especially. The city was also, like other Confederate outposts-in-exile at Niagara Falls, Windsor, London, St. Catharines, and Hamilton, a roost of spies and informers. "The bane and curse of carrying out anything in this country is the surveillance under which we act," Thompson complained to Confederate Secretary of State Judah P. Benjamin. "Detectives or those ready to give information stand at every street corner. Two or three can not interchange ideas without a reporter."³ He warned a countryman "against any stranger who might claim an acquaintance, etc., as a swarm of detectives from the United States, male and female, were quartered in Toronto."⁴

Commissioner Thompson nevertheless plotted on, traveling under the name of "Colonel Carson" to avoid surveillance, convinced finally that "nothing but violence can terminate the war." The result

was a series of ill-conceived exploits, all divulged in advance by either the informers at his elbow or the spies behind his back. An elaborate scheme to promote a Northwest Confederacy was attempted with Valandigham's assistance—and fizzled. Raids on Maine, the seizure of ships on the Great Lakes, the freeing of the thousands of Confederates imprisoned at Johnson's Island and other camps in the Midwest, an uprising in Chicago coordinated with the Democratic National Convention, a financial crisis brought on by pushing up the price of gold—not one such stratagem succeeded. Worse still, a minor raid on St. Albans, Vermont, on October 19, 1864, which Clay sanctioned without informing Thompson, was to cause such an international ruckus that Canada would thenceforth become a questionable port of refuge.

Something approaching madness permeated the schemes—and the schemers. Surprisingly, Thompson seemed undaunted by the timidity of the Copperheads in the Midwest, and continued to be incautious regarding his confidants despite the disclosures that stymied every operation. If anything, he was more determined than ever to succeed—desperate, in fact, by the fall of 1864, since the war across the border was going badly: Sheridan was wreaking havoc in the Shenandoah Valley, and Atlanta had fallen to Sherman. Then, on October 15, an editorial appeared in *The Richmond Whig* and was reprinted in its entirety by *The New-York Times*:

Sheridan reports to Grant that, in moving down the Valley to Woodstock, he has burned over two thousand barns filled with wheat, hay and farming implements, and over seventy mills filled with flour and wheat. This was done by order of Grant, himself, commander of all the Yankee armies. It is only the execution in part of the order to destroy everything in the Valley that will sustain life. The fell work is still going on. Now, it is an idle waste of words to denounce this sort of war. We have simply to regard it as a practical matter, and ask ourselves how it is to be met. There is one effectual way, and only one that we know of, to arrest and prevent this and every other sort of atrocity—and that is to burn one of the chief cities of the enemy, say Boston, Philadelphia or Cincinnati, and let its fate hang over the others as a warning of what may be done to them, if the present system of war on the part of the enemy is continued. If we are asked how such a thing can be done—we answer, nothing would be easier. A million dollars would lay the proudest city of the enemy in ashes. The

men to execute the work are already there. There would be no difficulty in finding there, here or in Canada, suitable persons to take charge of the enterprise and arrange its details. Twenty men with plans all preconcerted, and means provided, selecting some dry, windy night, might fire Boston in a hundred places and wrap it in flames from centre to suburb. They might retaliate on Richmond, Charleston, &c? Let them do so if they dare. It is a game at which we can beat them. New York is worth twenty Richmonds. They have a dozen towns to our one, and in their towns is centered nearly all their wealth. It would be immoral and barbarous? It is not immoral or barbarous to defend yourself by any means, or with any weapon the enemy may employ for your destruction. They chose to substitute the torch for the sword. We may so use their own weapon as to make them repent, literally in sackcloth and ashes, that they ever adopted it. . . .⁶

It was in this atmosphere of intrigue and adventure that Rob found himself when he reached Toronto in the second week of October 1864, shortly before the editorial above appeared. According to Lieutenant Fell, his messmate at Johnson's Island, Rob walked from Sandusky to Buffalo and thence into Canada, a distance of nearly 250 miles.⁷ It seems more likely, however, that he took the shorter route to Windsor, Canada, via Detroit, a distance of only 110 miles and an established escape route, and that he was given assistance and money by sympathetic Copperheads along the way.

What is certain is that once in Canada Rob made straight for Thompson's headquarters at the Queen's Hotel in Toronto. There, in a suite of rooms adorned with Confederate flags and emblems, he was confronted with a choice: to run the blockade and try to return home, or to remain in Canada and join in the harassing of the North across the border.

The decision must have been a difficult one. The farm in Homer was still in Confederate territory, but cut off and continually threatened. A Union army under Nathaniel P. Banks had advanced up the Red River that spring in an attempt to seize Shreveport. Federal troops, followed by bushwhackers, fanned out throughout the area. "Banks's marauders," as the residents of Homer would forever afterward call them, pillaged for food and destroyed some farms. The Kennedy place escaped destruction, but the family was hard-pressed.⁸ Rob's father, now fifty-nine years old, had only Cliff, eighteen, to help

him both to run the farm and to maintain a vital road in the parish that local authorities had charged him with overseeing. His daughters did their share: Susanna, twelve, and Kate, nine, helped with the kitchen chores, while Mary, who at twenty-six was pregnant with her first child, did what she could to manage the household. Eliza Lydia, ten years younger than her husband, was in an almost continual state of worry about her sons. The family had no idea where Rob was. Hyder, twenty-four, was in a hospital somewhere in Georgia after having been wounded on July 28 at the battle of Ezra Church while fighting Sherman's army outside Atlanta. Johnny, twenty-three, wounded in the same battle, was missing and presumed captured.

Mary's husband returned home periodically to lend a hand. Dr. Hopkins, nearing his thirty-second birthday, had been captured but paroled and was now attached to the Trans-Mississippi Department, which covered Confederate territory west of the river. He received furloughs twice yearly, and tried to time them to the planting and harvesting seasons. Cotton, however, although it commanded a high price, was virtually worthless because there was no place to sell or ship it; thousands upon thousands of bales belonging to Homer farmers had been burned when New Orleans fell in 1862, and again when Shreveport was threatened two years later.

The need and desire to return home were strong. But Rob undoubtedly wanted to make amends for his capture and his long period of inactivity while in prison. Edward A. Jackson of Yazoo City, Mississippi, who roomed with Bob at a boarding house in Toronto, recalled that there were "some fifty of us" who had escaped from Union prison camps:

It seemed to us that if our fifty could retain some fifteen or twenty thousand Federal troops on the Northern frontier—troops that otherwise would have helped in crushing our comrades down South—we were doing as much for the cause as any fifty men in the ranks. We ran, besides, risks greater and more fearful than those faced by the regular service.⁹

Asked to render "a service" to his country, Rob agreed. He thus became a party to the latest of Thompson's ideas: a bold scheme to seize control of major Northern cities—New York, Chicago, and Boston in particular—on Election Day, November 8, in a show of strength and solidarity with Copperhead factions.

Long after the event it would be said that Rob had actually led the expedition to New York. It would also be charged that he had met with John Wilkes Booth in Canada and conspired to assassinate Lincoln, that he had even traveled to Washington to confer with others in the plot, and that he had been a vociferous and leading exponent of rebellion and hatred in the social circle surrounding the Confederates in exile in Canada.¹⁰

None of this is true, however. Rob undoubtedly voiced his hatred of "Ape" Lincoln and "black" Republicanism, but no reliable evidence was ever found to connect him to the attack on Lincoln or on members of his cabinet. The leader of the small band being sent to New York was actually Colonel Robert M. Martin of Kentucky. He and a fellow Kentuckian, Lieutenant John W. Headley, were, like Hines, former officers who had served with Morgan. They had been sent to Canada by Richmond in September to aid in military operations against the North. Martin, in his mid-twenties, had steel-blue eyes and wore a moustache and goatee. He was six feet tall, but walked with a slight stoop because of a bullet wound in his right lung. Martin, unlike Rob, actually did meet Booth in Canada—he would later brag that he "had cracked many a bottle of wine" with him¹¹—and would, in fact, be a party to an aborted attempt on Lincoln's life a month before Booth struck successfully. Martin was also friendly in Toronto with Dr. Luke P. Blackburn, former chief surgeon in Sterling Price's division; the two men boarded at the same house. Blackburn was a native of Kentucky who had moved to Mississippi in the 1840s and won public commendation for his services during two yellow fever epidemics.¹² He and Martin discussed the feasibility of poisoning New York's water supply, but concluded that the amount of poison needed could not be obtained "without exciting suspicion." Headley, a modest, brown-haired younger officer—his beardless face struck some observers as feminine—tagged along with Martin wherever he went.

According to Commissioner Thompson afterward, it was Martin, "who having nothing else on hand" because of the failure of a plan to free Confederates from an Illinois prison camp, "expressed a wish to organize a corps to burn New York City."¹³ Martin himself would later say he believed "the way to bring the North to its senses was to burn Northern cities."¹⁴ The idea, however, had been fermenting for some time before Martin appeared in Canada. The election campaign in the North provided the catalyst: defeat of Lincoln became synony-



Lieutenant John W. Headley, one of the Confederates who took part in the plot to burn New York City. Courtesy of The New-York Historical Society.

mous with defeat of the Union's war policy. The editorial in *The Richmond Whig*, many would later believe, was the signal to put the plan into effect.

It was an incredible scheme. Martin's small force was to be responsible for setting off a series of fires as a diversion while Copperheads seized Federal buildings and municipal offices, took control of the police department, freed prisoners from Fort Lafayette, and threw the Army commander in New York, Major General John Adams Dix, into a dungeon. By sunset, the Confederate flag would fly over City Hall! Following the success of the "revolution," a convention of delegates from New York, New Jersey, and the New England states was to be held in New York City to form a Confederacy that would cooperate with the government in Richmond and with the Northwest Confederacy that would also be set up.

The plan appeared valid to Thompson. The Draft Riots of July 1863, had indicated both how easily the city's embittered lower classes could be incited to riot and how ineffectual were New York's small police force and the token Federal detachment stationed there. Moreover, there was an active ring of Copperheads in the city, men of considerable power and influence. The Confederates reasoned that the Peace Democrats knew they would be persecuted if Lincoln was reelected, so that "They must yield to a cruel and disgraceful despotism or fight."¹⁵

Prominent among the New York Copperheads were the two Wood brothers, both congressmen. Before the war they had run a lottery concession in Louisiana. Fernando Wood, the older of the two, was an immaculately dressed, poker-faced corrupter who had risen on the shoulders of "two-penny" politicians to be elected mayor of the city three times. As mayor in January 1861, he had declared that if the South seceded "it behooves every distinct community, as well as every individual, to take care of themselves." New York, he had urged, should then become a "Free City."¹⁶

Wood's brother Benjamin published one of the most virulent anti-Lincoln newspapers, *The New York Daily News*. The *News* had been instrumental in fanning the hatred that led to the Draft Riots by suggesting that whites were being pressed into military service to free Negroes who would subsequently move north to take away their jobs. The *News's* editor, Phineas Wright, a former New Orleans lawyer and

fire to the principal cities in the Northern States on the day of the Presidential election. It is my duty to communicate this information to you.²⁰

Seward sent similar telegrams to the mayors of Chicago, Buffalo, Detroit, Cleveland, Albany, Philadelphia, New Haven, Providence, Boston, Portland (Maine), and the Massachusetts cities of Portsmouth, Newburyport, and Salem.

McMaster could not have known about the telegrams when he summoned Rob and the others to his office the next morning—Thursday, November 3. The Confederates met with Governor Seymour's private secretary, who assured them that the Governor was ready to cooperate by remaining neutral. The Confederates left the meeting elated.

Later that afternoon, the text of Seward's telegram was made public. Even so, Rob and the others apparently still found nothing to indicate that the Federal Government had damaging information. However, the next morning, four days before the election, Major General Benjamin F. Butler—the devious, ambitious, vain, and pot-bellied “Beast” of New Orleans—arrived in New York City. Rumors said he was bringing 15,000 troops with him, to stem any disorders that might accompany the voting.

The conspirators were shocked—and to their further dismay, Butler moved into the Fifth-Avenue Hotel. They decided to set up a watch on the general's activities, hoping the rumors were false. They soon proved true, however. Butler's personal entourage was so large—he brought his wife and daughter along—that he had to leave the Fifth-Avenue because it didn't have enough available rooms. He switched to the Hoffman House, a new hotel a block north of the point where Broadway cut across Fifth Avenue.

The Confederate officers lurked about the Hoffman House as it took on the semblance of an Army field camp. Blue-uniformed officers and orderlies crowded its lobby, and sentries patrolled the corridors. Horses were hitched outside, and dispatch riders rushed back and forth through the entranceway and up and down the stairway to Butler's suite of twelve rooms on the first floor. By a stroke of fate, they were next to the rooms occupied by the corpulent, aging Winfield Scott, who had retired as General in Chief of the Army shortly after the outbreak of the war.

One room of the twelve was set up as a telegraph center, with an operator on duty twenty-four hours of the day. Sixty wires were strung into it, providing the general with direct contact not only with the War Department in Washington, but also with every major city in the state and every police station and polling place in the city.

Butler went into immediate consultation with Police Superintendent Kennedy, poring over maps of the city throughout the day. Kennedy was one of the few city officials whom Washington authorities trusted implicitly. The superintendent, on his own, had sent detectives to Baltimore in February 1861, to check on rumors of an attempt on Lincoln's life during his trip to the capital for his inauguration.²¹

Butler and Kennedy worked out a system of barricades to confine a riot, should one break out in the streets. Officers and scouts were selected to augment patrolmen at each polling place. All the city's volunteer firemen were put on standby duty. Chief Engineer John Decker alerted all bell-ringers in the fire towers to be on the lookout for fires, and to doublecheck against false alarms.

Although rumors had spread that as many as 15,000 soldiers were on their way to New York, Butler actually had less than 3,500 to work with. His request for 5,000 troops was turned down because the men were needed on the front lines in Virginia. The situation, in addition, was a delicate one. For one thing, most of the troops were New Yorkers who had already voted in the field by absentee ballot and could not enter the state on Election Day without voiding their votes.²² Secondly, a show of force within the city itself was bound to be interpreted by anti-Lincoln elements as an Administration attempt to intimidate voters. As a result, the officers and scouts assigned to poll-watching duties were ordered to wear civilian clothes. Then, as the main body of troops arrived by ship from Virginia, Butler stationed them temporarily at Army posts on Staten Island and in Brooklyn. The posts, on Federal land, were not legally considered part of New York State.

Wisely, Butler demurred from accepting an offer to call out the state militia, reflecting that “if they were called out they would be under arms, and in the case of difficulty it was not quite certain which way all of them would shoot.” Any armed forces in the confines of Manhattan on Election Day, he warned, would be treated “as enemies.”²³

As the day approached, Butler moved his men into position, setting up a cordon around Manhattan. He commandeered four ferry boats and put his infantrymen aboard them; two were stationed in the Hudson, the other two in the East River. Four swift tugs stood by with steam up to carry messages back and forth, as needed. Artillery batteries, with their horses in harness, were on board a vessel on the Jersey side of the Hudson. The general also positioned gunboats off the Battery to protect the Federal buildings and Arsenal downtown, and stationed a gunboat at High Bridge on the Harlem River to guard the Croton Aqueduct link with the new reservoir on York Hill in Central Park.

The Copperheads were thoroughly demoralized; many were afraid they would be arrested. Only Horton of the *Day Book* and Brooks of the *Express*, McMaster reported, wanted to go ahead with the plot. The rest were wavering.

On Sunday, November 6, two days before the election, McMaster sent for Rob, Martin, and Headley and expressed his doubts that the plot could be put into execution. On the next day, he said the Copperhead leaders had held a conference and decided to postpone action. The delay, he insisted, was only temporary: the plan would be revived once the election went off without incident and the troops were withdrawn.

That afternoon, however, reports reached New York that a number of Copperhead leaders and Confederate agents in Chicago had been arrested. Then, when Election Day passed quietly not only in New York but also in Buffalo, Boston, Cleveland and other major cities, the Confederate band in New York was hard put to explain the lack of concerted action.

It is impossible to pinpoint who was responsible for divulging the various uprisings that were to have taken place on Election Day. The Federal Government, in fact, had several sources of information. Its most famous spy, Felix Stidger, had won the confidence of Copperheads in the Midwest. Another, Colonel Lafayette C. Baker, the notorious head of what he himself styled the Secret Service, was later credited by one paper with finding out the details of the New York plot. Secretary of State Seward had been warned by the United States consul in Halifax. Charles A. Dana, Assistant Secretary of War, said

the conspiracy came to light in a letter intercepted in transit from Clay in Canada to Judah Benjamin in Richmond.²⁴ Headley, in his memoirs, blamed Hyams, calling him "the traitor or spy in our camp." Hyams, he noted, had been mysteriously absent from Toronto during the Confederates' sojourn in New York. Hyams also fits the description of one of the informers who leaked the operation to release the prisoners from Johnson's Island earlier in the fall, when Rob had been confined there.

McClellan won New York City, 73,716 votes to 36,687, but Lincoln took the nation, losing only three states. His victory, coupled with the battlefield triumphs of Sheridan and Sherman, completely dispelled the mood of failure on which the Copperheads had fed. On the local level, Copperheads in New York looked with foreboding on the future—especially since Fernando Wood, their leader, had lost his contest for reelection to the House.

Exasperated but persistent, the eight Confederates continued to watch Butler's comings and goings, hoping to persuade McMaster to take action while there was still time.

The Confederates continued to badger McMaster, but the more they insisted on carrying out the plan the more vacillating McMaster became. To while away their time between meetings with the Copperhead publisher, Martin and Headley continued to tour the city. They took in the wit Artemus Ward at Dodworth Hall, and went by ferry to Brooklyn to hear Henry Ward Beecher preach. They also spent several nights in brothels.

Unknown to them, however, detectives were following them, for informers were continuing to visit the authorities. A "man from Richmond" appeared at police headquarters, saying he knew that \$20,000 had been set aside to purchase phosphorus and to hire incendiaries.² He claimed to be acquainted with some of the conspirators, and offered to assist in ferreting them out if the Government would take care of his family. Ignored, the "man from Richmond" left the city in disgust. Chief Engineer John Decker of the Fire Department passed along a tip he received to the police but heard nothing about it afterward. A blockade runner got drunk in a saloon on Lispenard Street and talked of a plan that "would startle the community"; he said a hotel on Broadway was being used as a meeting place for rebel officers who were in the city to take part in it. Sergeant Young assigned two detectives to check out the story of a local resident who said that a plan to burn the city on election night had been postponed but was certain to be put into execution. He even gave a description of the conspirators, named the places to be set on fire, and provided other particulars. The detectives gave up trying to verify his story, however, concluding that it was a figment of the man's imagination.

The difficulty was, as the *Times* pointed out, that "the city is literally swarming with rebel adventurers, of an irresponsible and dangerous class." Young's nineteen-man detective force, swamped with work, could not begin to keep track of all the suspected Confederate agents. They apparently gave up following Martin and Headley after a week in which they could uncover nothing incriminating. At the same time, Detective Young returned from Canada, where he had gone to sound out post-election Rebel schemes. His report was relayed to General Dix, who, in turn, wrote the War Department on November 12 that he had decided to "let all the regulars return at once to Genl. Grant":

This decision has been influenced very strongly by the report of a very intelligent detective who returned from Canada this morning. He is confident there will be no more raids under rebel organization, though there may be small gangs of plunderers on the frontier . . .³

At last on Tuesday, November 15—the first snow of the season fell that day—Butler left New York to return to the front, "thus ending," the *Times* sighed with relief, "the movement on the part of the Government for the protection of New-York from the horrors of riots and bloodshed."

Rob and the others immediately pressed McMaster to agree to Thanksgiving Day, November 24, as the date for putting their plan into operation. Here was the chance, they insisted, to strike an effective blow at the North. They marshalled every argument they could think of: New York was now undefended, an attack on the city would relieve Lee in Virginia, there was still time to force peace on the North. McMaster hedged; he wanted time to think. Within twenty-four hours he had made up his mind—or rather William Tecumseh Sherman had made it up for him. More than 850 miles away in Georgia, Sherman set out with 60,000 troops from Atlanta, leaving that city in ruins, his destination unknown but profoundly feared. The Copperheads' determination collapsed completely. The defeat of the South, they believed, could no longer be stayed. McMaster withdrew from any further connection with the plan, which he now saw as doomed to failure.

Longmire was also growing reluctant. When the promised chemist never arrived from Canada, it was he who had arranged locally for a supply of "Greek fire" and also purchased quantities of turpentine and rosin. The Copperheads' withdrawal, however, threw a new light on the undertaking. The only thing that would be accomplished now, he said, would be the destruction of property and the loss of lives.

Rob and the other Confederates were dazed by the turn of events. An angry discussion took place. Price argued that they should return to Canada while they still could do so in safety. Rob was for carrying out their part of the overall plot—that is, for setting fire to the city. A new reason for carrying out their part of the conspiracy began to emerge: revenge. It was spurred by news reports that were beginning to

reach New York detailing Union ravages in the Shenandoah Valley. Typical was a story in the anti-Administration *Daily News*. It recounted how two divisions of Philip H. Sheridan's cavalry, under Grant's orders, had swept through the rich farmland, destroying more than 1,000 barns, scores of mills, hundreds of acres of unharvested corn, 300,000 bushels of harvested corn, 500 barrels of flour, more than 600,000 bushels of wheat:

If two divisions of Sheridan's army have done all this destruction, how much more shocking must be the total amount of that work done by the whole army! If in addition to this burning, breaking and destroying be added the plundering that has been carried out under the plea of subsistence off the country, the cruel ferocity of those outrages upon the inoffensive women, children, and old men of the Valley of the Shenandoah may well be regarded with an emotion of sickening horror.⁴

"Desolation," said the *News* in another article, "reigns in silence over the dismal scene."⁵

The fate of the people of the Shenandoah struck a responsive chord among the Confederates, many of whom had friends and relatives in Virginia. Rob, for his part, must have feared that a similar fate awaited his family in Louisiana. Stories were already circulating about the deprivations those remaining in Confederate Louisiana were suffering. The *Times*, for example, carried an account from *The Louisiana Democrat* of Alexandria under the heading, "Hard Times in Western Louisiana":

The condition of affairs, of what was once the State of Louisiana, is becoming really alarming. The long-dread Winter at hand, the town and country filled with a population whose prospects for a subsistence, at best, were precarious, but doubly so now by the action of the Government; hundreds of families, many of them those of soldiers, whose only means of living is the little store of Confederate money they, by the most pinching economy, had managed to save, is rendered worthless by the neglect of the Government in not providing the necessary facilities to enable them to exchange the old issue for the new. . . . Doubtless there are a few among us who will be enabled to pass through the Winter without much actual suffering, but the majority, the

mass of the people, must and will be upon the verge of starvation and freezing long before Spring. . . .⁶

The *Times* concluded with the comment, "This is about the average character of all the stories which refugees and 'intelligent contrabands' [former slaves] have to tell—a tale of want, misery, suffering."

Looking about him at the carefreeness, the luxury of a New York virtually untouched by war, Rob urged that the small band go ahead with plans to burn the city as "a lesson."

Martin, Headley, Chenault, Ashbrook, and Harrington agreed. Thompson in Toronto had been told "he could expect to hear from us in New York, no matter what might be done in other cities," Headley said. "He seemed to approve our determination and hoped for no more failures, and especially now when our last card was to be played."⁷

Determined to succeed, Rob and his colleagues laid their plans at a small cottage astride Central Park lent to Longmire—no questions asked—by a Southern woman, a refugee. There they worked out the details, deciding from the start to ignore Federal and municipal buildings because these were guarded.

The easiest places of access—and the glaring symbols of the North's wealth—were the city's hotels. There were more than 125 in the city, the most opulent of them on Broadway. The Astor House, across from City Hall Park, was the grande dame of them all, built of solid granite, with accommodations for 400 persons: the largest hotel in the nation when it opened in 1836. In the years since, bigger and more sumptuous hotels had been built, but the Astor remained popular with politicians, who liked to dine in the splendid restaurant in the center of the lobby, where a fountain had once stood.

Moving north on Broadway one came to the St. Nicholas Hotel, ideally situated at the corner of Spring Street near many theatres: Bryant's, the Broadway, the Menagerie, Wood's Minstrels. Many of its guests were from the entertainment world—the Booth Brothers and Phineas T. Barnum, among others—but it had also been a favorite stopping place for an unlikely assortment of Americans—"Stonewall" Jackson, Stephen A. Douglas, Matthew Vassar, Horatio Seymour.

Built at a cost of more than \$1 million in 1854, the St. Nicholas was six stories tall and divided into three wings, with 600 rooms that held upwards of 1,000 guests. Magnificent chandeliers, candelabra, and mirrors graced its halls and three dining rooms, and the corridors were completely carpeted. The hotel's most impressive feature was its lobby, 200 feet long and 60 wide, with a massive oak staircase at its heart that led to the suites above. It required more than 300 employees to run the hotel.

Nearby, next door to Niblo's Garden at Prince Street, was the Metropolitan Hotel, a huge brownstone edifice that boasted 13,000 yards of carpeting and 12 miles of water and gas pipes. The Metropolitan, which cost \$1 million to build and handled 600 lodgers with ease, had steam heating, transoms over its doors to provide a rudimentary form of ventilation, and "sky parlors" from which lady guests could watch the promenade on Broadway below. The interior decorations—the fancy silverware included—cost \$200,000. The Metropolitan, like a number of other hotels, was conducted on the European plan, with or without meals.

A few blocks farther north was the marble-faced Lafarge House, adjoining the Winter Garden Theatre. Considered an "elegant resort" for the "floating population of the New World," the Lafarge could accommodate more than 500 guests.⁸

Perhaps the most impressive hotel of all was the "New" Fifth-Avenue, facing Madison Square where Broadway crossed Fifth Avenue. It had rooms for 800 guests and a "perpendicular railway," an innovation especially popular with the elderly and female guests who did not like to climb stairs. The Fifth-Avenue's public rooms off its lobby were crowded with gold brokers and speculators. The hotel was considered most eligible for visitors from the South because it was near the railroad depots. As an extra added attraction in its attempt to lure clientele from the more centrally located hotels, the Fifth-Avenue included a fourth meal ("late supper") in its daily rate of \$2.50.

Although the other hotels throughout the city were less ostentatious, they were almost always full—especially given the unusual comings and goings spurred by the war. Lovejoy's on Park Row opposite City Hall Park, which was large enough to have several wings, catered to transient businessmen and travelers enroute to other parts of the Union; it held 250 overnight guests. A block away, the Tam-

many, the meeting place of Tammany Democrats, was well known for its hospitality, and a favorite lunching spot for businessmen and their clients. The United States, on Fulton Street near the East River, was a creaky but comfortable old wooden hotel filled with merchants and ship captains. Businessmen in the Wall Street area lunched regularly at the Howard, one of the largest and best conducted of the older downtown hotels.

Rob and each of the others took four hotels as targets. Rooms were to be taken in advance wherever possible, and paid for in advance for one week. Some use of the rooms was necessary to avert suspicion, although it was common practice for merchants to rent lodgings in advance from which to take side trips to the suburbs on business.

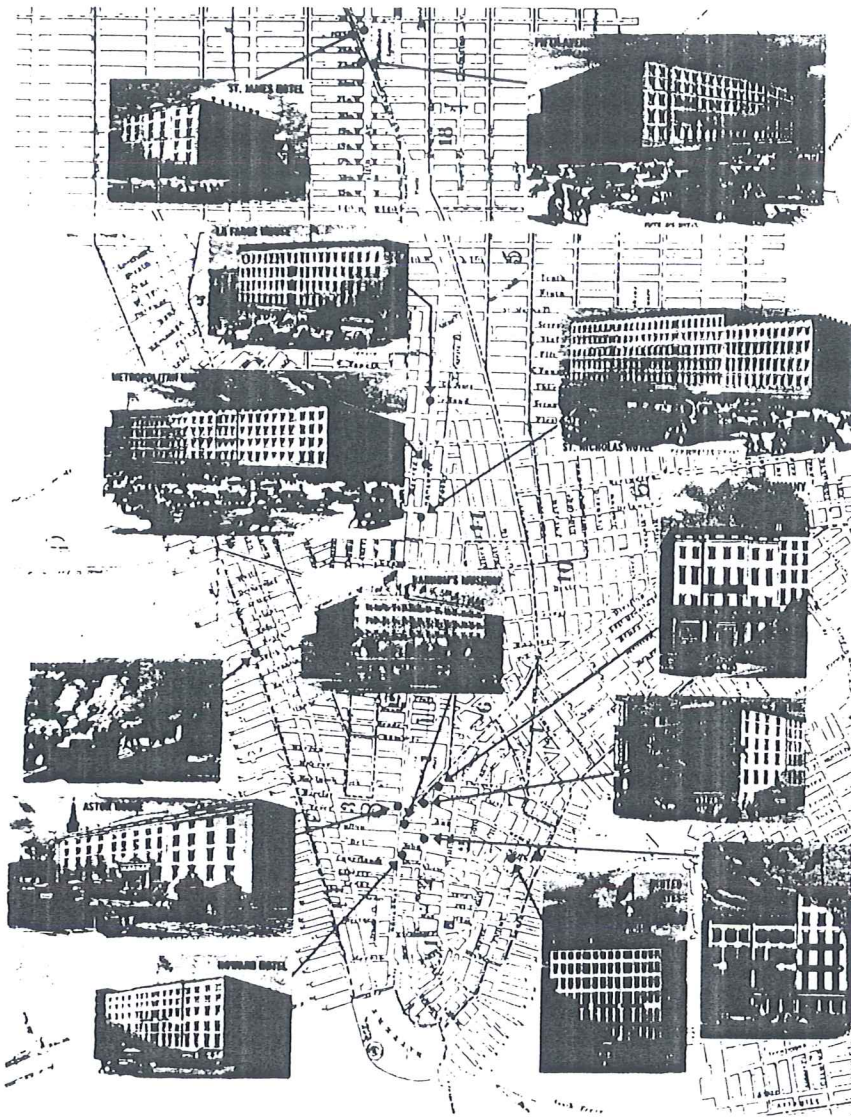
On Friday, November 18, a crisp fall day, Ashbrook and Harrington moved into the St. Nicholas Hotel. Two days later, Headley took a room at the Astor, where it was decided further conferences would be held.

That same day, as a severe rainstorm that would last thirty hours began,⁹ another unexpected arrival frustrated further action. Harrington, entering the lobby of the Astor on his way to Headley's room, thought he saw "Butcher" Grant in the lobby. He was right.

Grant, however, in contrast to Butler, was trying to keep his presence in New York a secret. He was on a shopping expedition with his wife following a brief visit to their children's school in Burlington, New Jersey. It was Grant's first visit to the city since his graduation from West Point in 1843. Although he didn't want his presence announced, word nevertheless soon spread across the city.

Surprisingly undaunted, the Confederates continued to take rooms in hotels around the city, although holding their target date in abeyance. On Monday, November 21, Rob and Chenault took rooms at Lovejoy's, and Harrington checked into the Metropolitan on the same day. Chenault also registered at the Howard Hotel the following day, after which he and Rob took rooms at the Exchange Hotel.

Grant left on the twenty-first. The Confederates learned of his departure two days later, when newspapers carried accounts of an interview he had finally agreed to. Sherman's drive through Georgia toward the sea, he said, "is one of the most momentous of the war. Its success will unquestionably inflict on the Confederates considerable



Map shows the scope of the area of New York City imperiled by the Confederate attack. In addition to the fires set at the eleven hotels pictured here, a fire was also set at the New England Hotel in the densely populated Bowery district northwest of City Hall Park. There were also fires on the Hudson River docks near the one shown and at a lumber yard. Map: courtesy of The New-York Historical Society; hotels: *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, December 17, 1864. Reprinted by permission of the American Heritage Publishing Company.

four flights up, in the northeast wing. Rob repeated the procedure performed earlier at the New England Hotel, only this time he piled the bedding and the mattress in the center of the floor rather than on the single bed, which he judged as too narrow to hold it all. Before locking the door, he closed the windows and shutters. He reached Chenault's room, number 91 (taken under the name of "J. Jones Schnectady"), in the southeast wing of the same floor, without passing anyone along the way. Again, he rapidly threw the bedding together and doused it with phosphorus. In his rush, however, he had unopened a bottle of phosphorus and two vials of turpentine that he had meant to pour onto the heap of blankets, towels, sheets, and drapes. He locked the room and headed for the stairs.

Chenault walked up to his room, number 44, on the fourth floor of the Howard Hotel on lower Broadway, without being seen. He had taken it three days earlier, signing in as "S. M. Harner, Philadelphia." He piled the bedding together in a heap on the bed, and flung a chair and the wooden washstand on top. He emptied two bottles of phosphorus on the pile, leaving one empty bottle on the bed and the other on the floor. He locked the door as he left, and passed by the desk downstairs again without being noticed. He walked out on Broadway, in the financial district off Maiden Lane. He headed toward City Hall Park, apparently in order to catch a streetcar to the next hotel on his list. Somewhere in the vicinity of Park Row, however, he met Rob. As yet they could hear no fire alarms, so Rob suggested they see what was happening on Broadway: the other Confederates had had ample time to start some fires by now.

Ashbrook and Harrington were at the St. Nicholas Hotel on Broadway at Spring Street. Ashbrook was in room 139, in the middle building of the sprawling hotel. He had taken it a week earlier, registering as "J. T. Allen, Albany." To make certain his fire would spread, Ashbrook took a box of matches from his jacket and dumped them on the saturated mound on the bed, then tossed a sperm candle from the mantel onto it. He locked the door behind him, and headed downstairs to wait for Harrington.

Harrington, meanwhile, was in room 174 on the sixth floor of the front building, which he had taken the same day as Ashbrook, using