

## History Center Eager to Buy Sherman's Fiery Letters

Civil War correspondence detailed battle for Atlanta

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Jim Bruns of the Atlanta History Center and Seth Kaller look over collection of documents written by Gen. Sherman.

Photo by Kimberly Smith  
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Fifty letters handwritten by Gen. William T. Sherman during his Civil War campaign to capture and destroy Atlanta were displayed Monday at the Atlanta History Center, which is seeking \$400,000 from private donors to purchase the collection.

It includes floridly penned orders Sherman wrote to his generals during the 1864 campaign. In one, he threatens to shoot his own men for shirking their duty: "The only proper fate of such miscreants is that they be shot as common enemies to their profession and country, and all officers and patriots sent to arrest them will shoot them without mercy on the slightest impudence or resistance."

All of the orders "are real. A lot of scholarship has gone into making sure," said History Center Director Jim Bruns.

The collection has 52 Special Field Orders. In addition to the 50 written by Sherman himself, one of the orders was penned by an adjutant, probably a colonel, and signed by Sherman. Another was written by an assistant but not signed by Sherman. Some have the word "confidential" written in the corners, though all orders were considered top secret.

Bruns said the price — asked by the Seth Kaller Inc. historical documents company in White Plains, N.Y. — might seem steep, but that the letters would be valuable to the History Center "and especially to all of Atlanta."

"They are in Sherman's own handwriting," said Gordon Jones, vice president of Exhibitions and Collections at the center. "They are cool."

The private viewing Monday was open only to potential donors, from board members to those who have given significant gifts to the history center in the past.

Although the letters will be returned to New York later this week, Bruns expects that the history center will raise the \$400,000 needed from private donors.

Seth Kaller, 39, owner of the firm, laid out most of the plastic-wrapped letters on a 12-foot-long mahogany conference table. When Kaller took letters out of their protective containers and didn't use gloves, Jones cringed. "That won't happen when they are in our possession," he said.

### **Excellent condition**

The letters — which reflect Sherman's trademark precision — were neatly written and bore no evidence of smudges, fingerprints or stains of any kind. Some were signed off as W.T. Sherman. Others feature W.T.S. and a few, just Sherman. All ended with MG — for major general. Kaller said he obtained the documents last December at a private auction. The letters are in such good condition, he said, because they were "carefully kept over the years, either by Sherman himself or an adjutant, and passed down through the family."

In the early 1960s, they were obtained by an autograph dealer, who sold them to a private collector, who kept them until 2004, when the collection was sold to Kaller for "more than \$200,000." He contacted the history center almost immediately, and no one else.

Many of the letters, written from Kingston, Acworth, Decatur, East Point and "in the field," are dramatic and illuminate Sherman's reputation for ruthlessness.

In several letters, Sherman made it clear that war is terrible but that he had no qualms about ordering the bombardment of Atlanta civilians.

On July 21, the day after the Battle of Peachtree Creek and the day before the Battle of Atlanta, he ordered his generals to begin firing cannons into the city.

On Sept. 8, a few days after occupying Atlanta, he ordered all civilians to evacuate the city between Sept. 12 and Sept. 22, except for a handful of locals deemed "loyal" enough to stay.

Sherman, called "Uncle Billy" by his men, led them through a series of bloody battles from Kennesaw Mountain to Peachtree Creek to the Decatur area, where most of the Battle of Atlanta was waged on July 22, 1864. His army also defeated Rebel forces at Jonesboro, Ezra Church, New Hope Church in Paulding County. His strategy was to outflank Confederate armies and push them close to Atlanta, and he succeeded except for one major setback, at Kennesaw Mountain. There, he ordered waves of Union troops against nearly impregnable Confederate fortifications, suffering heavy losses.

### **Hatred is a good draw**

Civil War experts expressed enthusiasm at the chance to see letters penned by Sherman. "To have the originals is to have a piece of history," said Emory Thomas, Regent's professor emeritus of history at the University of Georgia and author of several Civil War books.

One of those attending the private showing Monday was board member Bo DuBose. Much of the history center's Civil War collection was donated by DuBose and his father. Some of the muskets, bayonets and other artifacts were found by DuBose's father in 1961 when "they were digging up for the interstate near Grady Hospital."

DuBose, a collector ever since, was clearly impressed. "The gist of most of these has been published in the ORs ['The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies']," DuBose said. "But there are two orders that have never been published, and the people who copied them may have just gotten the gist, not any innuendo."

Another reason the letters would "add greatly" to the history center's Civil War exhibit is that "a lot of people down here still hate Sherman," said Bruns, who worked for many years in executive positions at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. "He burned the city. He shelled the city. He killed innocent civilians. And the fact that Sherman is so hated would be very good for the history center, because people would come to see the letters."