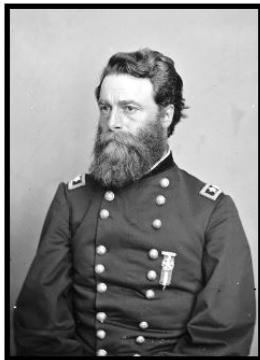


The Invasion Begins

Heavy rains delayed the start of Sherman's advance through the state, but on February 1, the invasion began in earnest. Howard's right wing marched inland along the south side of the Salkehatchie River. Its goal: to take two major crossings of the river, at Buford's Bridge and Rivers Bridge. The task of taking Buford's Bridge, the northernmost of the two crossings, fell to troops of Major General John Logan's 15th Army Corps. Rivers Bridge would be the objective of Major General Frank Blair's 17th Army Corps. Spearheading the advance on Rivers Bridge were the 5000 men of the 1st Division of the 17th Corps, commanded by Major General Joseph Anthony Mower, one of Sherman's most aggressive subordinates.



Left: Major General Frank Blair, Jr., commanded the Union army's 17th Corps. An officer in the corps described Blair as "a first-class Rebel hater." Right: Major General Joseph Anthony Mower was an aggressive and profane commander who earned the nickname "Swamp Lizard" from his men during the campaign in South Carolina. He pushed his 1st Division soldiers hard – some believed recklessly – through the Salkehatchie swamp at Rivers Bridge. Both, Library of Congress.

Governor Magrath had urged South Carolinians in the path of Sherman's army to move their property or destroy it so it could not be used by the Federal troops. Many residents south of the Salkehatchie heeded Magrath's words and moved their families, slaves, and food to the other side of the river. Some advancing Union soldiers found little food and forage and few slaves to assist them. "Houses, farmyards, and workshops were closed, and the whole region seemed deserted," a Northern newspaper reported. Union soldiers generally burned the empty homes and other structures they found.



In January 1865 William Ransome Barker evacuated his wife and children from their plantation west of Rivers Bridge. "I shall never forget the terrible day when we left," Pauline Barker recalled years later, when her father's family became "a part of the general exodus of old men, young lads, women and children" who fled from the area before Sherman's advance. Harper's Weekly.

Wheeler's Confederate cavalry troopers tried to delay Mower's soldiers on the road to the river, but the Union infantrymen brushed them aside in brief running battles. Mower's troops found a bridge crossing the Salkehatchie at a place called Broxton's Bridge, several miles downstream of their objective at Rivers Bridge, but Confederate troops there were ready, holding strong, well-prepared earthen fortifications. Leaving a small force at Broxton's to occupy its Confederate defenders, Mower continued his rapid advance to the next crossing of the Salkehatchie, Rivers Bridge.

At Rivers Bridge the Union troops encountered more Confederate soldiers, veterans of the 32nd and 47th Georgia Infantry, supported by the four cannons of Captain William Earle's South Carolina artillery battery and several companies of the 3rd South Carolina Cavalry. The Confederates numbered only about 700 to 800 men, but they occupied an already strong position and had made it even stronger. They held the high ground on the far side of the river and were dug in at well-designed earthworks. Before Mower's men could even get at the Confederates in the fortifications, they would have to cross the Salkehatchie. The river flowed through a dense swamp that in some places was up to a mile wide, its numerous channels ranging from ankle- to waist-deep. The only road across the swamp was a narrow earthen causeway with multiple bridges, and some of the bridges had been partially dismantled. Two of the Confederate cannons were sited to fire down a long, straight stretch of the causeway through the swamp. Any Federal soldiers who managed to make it all the way up the