This Day in History… November 25, 1864

Confederates Burn Manhattan



One New York paper called the plot, "one of the most fiendish and inhuman acts known to modern times."

On November 25, 1864, Confederate agents tried to set fire to hotels and public buildings across New York City. The attack was intended to disrupt the Union city, but fire crews contained the blazes before they could spread widely.

New York was far from the main battlefronts, but the Civil War shaped life there. The city had close commercial ties to the South before the war, and residents held differing views about the conflict. In July 1863, anger over the military draft and racial tensions erupted in the New York Draft Riots. The violence killed people and damaged homes and businesses. Federal troops, including soldiers transferred from the Gettysburg campaign, helped restore order. Major General John A. Dix was placed in command of the city's military defenses.



The Confederate government claimed it wasn't involved in the attack. One Southern paper stated, "If there is any place in the North that ought to be spared, that place is New York."

In 1864, Confederate agents based in Canada planned attacks on Union targets. One group proposed setting fires across New York on November 8, Election Day. They described the operation as retaliation for Union General Philip Sheridan's destruction of farms and property in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. But the plot became known to federal officials. Secretary of State William Seward alerted New York Mayor C. Godfrey Gunther, and troops under General Benjamin Butler entered the city. Gunboats were stationed nearby. When no attack occurred by November 15, Butler withdrew the troops. The plotters then set November 25 as their new date. Robert Cobb Kennedy later said the original plan was postponed because the incendiary material was not ready.

The timing gave the operation added visibility. November 25 was Evacuation Day, a civic holiday marking the British Army's departure from New York in 1783. That evening, the Booth brothers—actors Edwin, Junius Brutus Booth Jr., and John Wilkes—appeared together in a benefit performance of *Julius Caesar* at the Winter Garden Theatre. The show was raising money for a Shakespeare statue in Central Park.



One conspirator claimed "The way to bring the North to its senses [is] to burn Northern cities."

The Confederate agents entered New York under assumed names and checked into hotels. On the evening of November 25, they used bottles of an incendiary mixture, called Greek fire in reports, to start blazes in hotel rooms and other locations. One of the first fires was discovered at the St. James Hotel at about 8:45 p.m. Staff broke into the locked room and put it out.

More fires were reported over the next few hours. The plotters targeted hotels and tried to start fires at public sites, including Barnum's American Museum. A fire at the LaFarge House, next door to the Winter Garden, alarmed the theater audience during the Booths' performance. Reports vary on the total number of fires and targets; accounts describe attempts at more than a dozen hotels, as well as theaters and the museum. Investigators found incendiary bottles and bags in some rooms. Several devices failed to ignite or were put out before nearby buildings caught fire. No one was killed, though the fires caused alarm and disrupted the city.



They used "Greek Fire" – a mix of sulfur, naphtha, and quicklime that catches fire when exposed to air.

The plan had broader aims than arson. According to the New York Court of Appeals' historical account, the fires were intended to distract authorities while the plotters sought to meet local supporters, seize the city's treasury and arsenal, and free Confederate prisoners held at Fort Lafayette. They did not carry out those plans. The agents escaped to Canada before they could be arrested.

Kennedy, a Confederate officer who set fires at several hotels and Barnum's Museum, was later arrested in Detroit. A military commission convicted him of acting as a spy and engaging in irregular warfare. He was hanged at Fort Lafayette in New York Harbor on March 25, 1865.

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