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 sized along the north side of the Salkehatchie River. Its goal was to take two major crossings of the river, at Bird’s Bridge and Rivers Bridge. The task of taking Bird’s Bridge, the southernmost 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. Speculating about the fate of the troops commanded by Major General Joseph Anthony Moreau, one of Sherman’s most aggressive subordinates.

Governor Magrath had hoped South Carolinians in the path of Sherman’s army to either protest or destroy it so it could not be used by the Federal troops. Many residents south of the Salkehatchie fleded Magrath’s demands and moved their plantations, slaves, and crops to the other side of the river. Some advancing Union soldiers found little food and forage and few slaves to assist them. "Homes, factories, and workshops were closed, and the whole region seemed deserted." Northern newspapers reported Union soldiers generally burned the empty houses and other structures they found.

In January 1865 William Ransom Burton escorted his wife and children from their plantation west of Rivers Bridge. "I shall never forget the terrible day when we left. Father Burton received word late that his father’s family became "a part of the general wastes of all men, women and children" who fell from the army before Sherman’s advance. "Harper’s Weekly."

Whereas Confederates cavalry troops tried to delay Moreau’s soldiers on the road to the river, but the Union infantrymen braved them and made it to head crossing huts. Moreau’s troops found a bridge crossing the Salkehatchie at a place called Bostrom’s Bridge, several miles downstream of their objective at Rivers Bridge, but Confederate troops there were sturdy, holding strong, well-guarded earthworks. Leaving a small force at Bostrom’s to occupy the Confederate defenses, Moreau continued his rapid advance to the next crossing of the Salkehatchie, Rivers Bridge.

At Rivers Bridge the Union troops encountered some Confederates soldiers, veterans of the 32nd and 47th Georgia Infantry, supported by the few remains of Captain William Enke’s South Carolina artillery battery and several companies of the 3rd South Carolina Cavalry. The Confederates outnumbered only about 700 to 500 men, but they occupied an already strong position and held it even stronger. They held the high ground on the far side of the river and were dug in at well-designed earthworks. Before Moreau’s men could even get at the Confederates in the fortifications, they would have to cross the Salkehatchie. The area flows through a dense swamp that in some places rose up to a mile wide, its numerous channels ranging from ankle- to waist-deep. The only road across the swamp was a narrow, cart-sized crossway with multiple bridges, and some of the bridges had been partially dismantled. Two of the Confederate rascals were used to cut down a long, straight stretch of the crossway through the swamp. Any Federal soldier who managed to make it all the way up the