Carlisle is located in the Cumberland Valley of south central Pennsylvania, close enough to the Mason-Dixon Line that rumors of Confederate invasion surfaced often during the Civil War. In the summer of 1863 those rumors became fact. In an attempt to deal a major, perhaps fatal blow to the Union cause, General Robert E. Lee ordered his Army of Northern Virginia northward through the Shenandoah Valley and into Pennsylvania. The spearhead of that army reached Carlisle on Saturday, June 27, 1863. Its commanding officer, Lt. Gen. Richard Ewell, had been posted at the U.S. Army cavalry school in Carlisle after graduating from West Point in 1841 and knew many local citizens. His force included a vanguard of about 1,200 cavalrymen under Brig. Gen. Albert Jenkins, followed by over 8,000 infantrymen in the division of Maj. Gen. Robert Rodes. West of town, Gen. Edward Johnson had 6,000 troops camped at Alexander Springs near Rte 11 in Carlisle. The Confederate Troops occupied and controlled the town for three days. They confiscated needed supplies and damaged the Cumberland Valley Railroad but otherwise left the town relatively unharmed. Mechanisburg was captured on June 28. From June 28-30, they fought skirmishes at Oyster's Point in Camp Hill and Sporting Hill in Hampden Township, coming within three miles of Harrisburg. The Confederate forces then were recalled to Gettysburg where 37% of the Army of Northern Virginia would be killed, wounded or declared missing in action. On Wednesday, July 1, Union militia commanded by Maj. Gen. William “Baldy” Smith reoccupied Carlisle. Shortly after their arrival, however, another Confederate force, hardened cavalry under the command of Maj. Gen. J.E.B. Stuart and Brig. Gen. Fitzhugh Lee, approached the town from the southeast. They demanded the surrender of Carlisle under threat of artillery bombardment. Gen. Smith refused, replying, “Shell away and be damned!” Stuart obliged, and downtown Carlisle came under several attacks. There were some casualties among the Union militiamen and minor damage to property. Stuart also ordered the burning of the U.S. Army Barracks, and most of the buildings there were destroyed. He also set fire to the gas works and a lumber yard. He intended a cavalry attack the next morning, but overnight he received orders from Gen. R.E. Lee recalling his force to the main Confederate army in Gettysburg. Carlisle was spared any further damage. For more self-guided tours go to visitcumberlandvalley.com, or visit the Cumberland Valley Visitors Bureau.

Cumberland County Historical Society is located at 21 N. Pitt St. in Carlisle. In addition to its library, photo collection, and education facilities, the society houses an award-winning museum that is free and open to the public. Those interested in learning more about the 1863 invasion of Carlisle can take a walking tour led by trained guides for a small fee. To find out more, go to historiesociety.com or call (717) 249.7610.

Information written and edited by Cumberland County Historical Society (CCHS) volunteers with assistance from CCHS staff and the Cumberland County Civil War 150 Steering Committee. All photos are courtesy of CCHS.

CWS008-092015
In April 1861, Carlisle volunteers answered President Lincoln's call to arms and boarded trains at the Cumberland Valley Railroad Depot at the southwest corner of Pitt and High streets. The CV railroad operated seven days a week during the war, carrying soldiers and supplies through the middle of Carlisle to distant battlefields. As part of its invasion strategy the Confederate Army aimed to disrupt Union rail lines, weaken morale, and force a settlement to the conflict.

Many local citizens chose to remain behind locked doors on Sunday, June 28, 1863. Few townspeople worshipped at either First Lutheran or Second Presbyterian*, the only churches to open their doors that day. When the First Lutheran minister asked Gen. Ewell if the congregation could pray for the President, Ewell replied, “Pray for him. I’m sure he needs it.” On July 1, artillery shells damaged the roof at St. John’s Episcopal Church and exploded in the First Presbyterian churchyard.

*Cambria County Historical Society has begun an attempt to identify and recognize those who were killed at that time.

*Location of these churches in 1863 are shown on the map with a star.