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Actual Factual Georgia

By Andy Johnston

For the AJC

Q: Local lore has it that a Catholic church, Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, across the street from the Georgia Railroad Depot, was spared from the torch under the express orders of General William T. Sherman, a practicing Catholic. Does the historical record support that belief?

—James T. Miller, Hoschton

A: Sherman's religious beliefs might not have played much of a part in preserving the church. It appears a wily local priest named Father Thomas O'Reilly was the true savior of the Catholic Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. Apparently, O'Reilly got the ear of the man who said he would make Georgia howl before his troops could grab their torches. The church's website says O'Reilly warned Sherman's staff that the Union army would face "massive desertions" from the Catholics in the ranks if the church was turned to ash. Some Union soldiers even helped protect the church during the conflagration, the website says, although it was damaged, and the Yankees also might have used it as a hospital. As far as Sherman's religious beliefs go, a New York Times article published on Feb. 13, 1891, a day before his death, stated that although his wife was a devout Catholic, even "well known to the Pope," and his oldest son Thomas joined the priesthood, Sherman was a "liberal man in religious matters, attached to no particular church, and tolerant of all." However, priests were called to his deathbed, the Times article reported.

Q: When the European settlers came, they followed Indian trails, turning them into roads. Did the Indians follow the buffaloes in making the original trails, and, if so, were buffaloes once a major factor in Georgia? Were the herds large and when did they leave Georgia?

—Don G. White, Atlanta

A: It's no bull. Georgia was home to where the buffalo roamed until the late 18th or early 19th centuries, according to several accounts, including a lecture from former UGA professor Louis DeVorse given to the Athens Historical Society in 1998. He cited Sir Robert Montgomery, an early proponent of Georgia's colony, who wrote, "...all the Land that lies between two great rivers, Allatamaha (Altamaha) and Savanna (Savannah)... and abounding with large herds of Deer, wild buffalo's, and most kinds of Beasts, Birds, and Sea and river fish, to an incredible degree of plenty," and Georgia founder James Oglethorpe, who wrote in a

1736 letter that he hunted buffalo with a Creek Indian leader named Tomochichi. DeVorsey also wrote that there is “abundant evidence” that Indians used trails made by the herds and that Georgia’s buffalo likely were hunted to extinction.

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