

# Fort Sumter, The “First Shot” Revisited

By Valerie Protopapas on Apr 12, 2021



We have been told that the first shot fired in the “Civil War” was fired by the Confederacy at Fort Sumter in response to the Lincoln government’s attempt to rearm and re-supply that federal installation. The Sumter matter is important as after all the debate over the causes of the War are exhausted, there is always that one charge made

against the Confederacy, to wit: the South started the war by firing the first shot against the federally owned and held Fort Sumter in Charleston harbor. No matter what the original subject, when those arguing the rightness of the Union to wage war against the Confederacy, the matter usually ends with this one particular charge to which most who defend the South seem unable to respond – at least effectively.

But, in fact, the charge is *false*. The first *actual* act of war was not executed in the open in response to military provocation, but in the dark as a damnable piece of subterfuge involving sabotage and the occupation of the buildings and land of a sovereign state located in a sovereign country that was *not* the country of the attackers involved! In the darkness of Christmas Eve, 1860, Major Robert Anderson, commandant of the federal forces at *Fort Moultrie* in Charleston Harbor, left that fort – his assigned post according to his government – and after cutting down the flag pole, spiking the fort’s guns and taking his contingent of soldiers together with all munitions and supplies, stealthily made his way by boat to Fort Sumter situated on an island in Charleston harbor. This was done in secret and without any notification by Anderson’s superiors in the federal government that its troops would leave Moultrie and thereupon occupy Sumter, *a facility that had reverted to South Carolina after*

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*the the provisions of the lease held by Washington had been allowed to lapse!*

The federal government under outgoing President James Buchanan – who was still in office at the time – had signed an agreement with South Carolina – now part of the newly created Confederate States of America – to make no attempt to relieve, rearm, re-supply or send more federal troops into Moultrie in exchange for that State government’s promise not to remove the federal troops in that fort by force. Of course, there was no need to re-supply the fort as the people of Charleston sold food to the federal troops despite the fact that South Carolina was no longer in the federal union. **Sumter, however, was not part of *any* agreement because it was no longer a federal facility and such troops as remained in Charleston were assigned to Fort Moultrie! But by leaving Moultrie and moving to Sumter in secret and without informing the State of South Carolina or the newly established Confederate government of which that State was a part, Anderson was committing an act that can only be seen as hostile even if no shots were fired at the time.**

**This act was further exacerbated by the damage Anderson did to Moultrie in spiking its guns, removing its supplies and munitions and even cutting down its flag pole, a symbolic but potent rejection of the new Confederacy that in and of itself was a warlike act. Anderson moved to Fort Sumter because it was an island fort and therefore far more easily supplied and defended than land-locked Moultrie, still further evidence of the military nature of his operation. And as the possession of Sumter had reverted South Carolina and was, therefore, no longer a federal installation, Anderson’s actions constituted nothing short of an invasion by the federal government of the land and property of the Confederate States of America! Furthermore, though no shots were fired in this military “invasion,” violence was indeed *threatened* as**

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**the civilian workers occupying Sumter at the time, were run out of the facility with guns and bayonets and forced to take small boats back across the harbor into Charleston, a further example of a warlike action against unarmed and unprepared noncombatants!**

So it is obvious both in law and history, that the first act of hostility in the War of Secession was not the later false flag operation involving Sumter, but Major Anderson’s abandonment of Fort Moultrie and his occupation of Fort Sumter. It is equally obvious that Anderson, a mere major, would hardly have mounted such an offense on his own recognizance, thus making it equally obvious that his actions were ordered from those “higher-up” the chain of command. Lincoln had not yet been inaugurated, but he was in touch with General Winfield Scott about the military options open to him with regards to the consequences of secession and the federal forts and installations in seceded States, so it is more than probable that Anderson was ordered by his superiors to abandon Moultrie – which was neither easily defended nor rearmed – and retire to Sumter whose location provided a better chance at both. **As that is the case, then it is not wrong to claim the first act of the so-called Civil War took place on Christmas Eve, 1860 and not April 15th, 1861.**

Major Anderson’s warlike act that was compounded by use of rifles and bayonets against unarmed and unsuspecting civilian workers at Sumter is described in this account by Abner Doubleday an officer in his command who participated in what was seen by Doubleday at least, as a “victory” in a war yet to be declared:

“Every thing being in readiness, we passed out of the main gates, and silently made our way for about a quarter of a mile to a spot where the boats were hidden behind an irregular pile of rocks, which originally

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formed part of the sea-wall. There was not a single human being in sight as we marched to the rendezvous, and we had the extraordinary good luck to be wholly unobserved. We found several boats awaiting us, under charge of two engineer officers, Lieutenants Snyder and Meade. They and their crews were crouched down behind the rocks, to escape observation. In a low tone they pointed out to me the boats intended for my company, and then pushed out rapidly to return to the fort. Noticing that one of the guard-boats was approaching, they made a wide circuit to avoid it. I hoped there would be time for my party to cross before the steamer could overhaul us; but as among my men there were a number of unskillful oarsmen, we made but slow progress, and it soon became evident that we would be overtaken in mid-channel. It was after sunset, and the twilight had deepened, so that there was a fair chance for us to escape. While the steamer was yet afar off, I took off my cap, and threw open my coat to conceal the buttons. I also made the men take off their coats, and use them to cover up their muskets, which were lying alongside the rowlocks. I hoped in this way that we might pass for a party of laborers returning to the fort. The paddle-wheels stopped within about a hundred yards of us; but, to our great relief, after a slight scrutiny, the steamer kept on its way. In the mean time our men redoubled their efforts, and we soon arrived at our destination.

As we ascended the steps of the wharf, crowds of workmen rushed out to meet us, most of them wearing secession emblems. One or two Union men among them cheered lustily, but the majority called out angrily, “What are these soldiers doing here?” I at once formed my men, charged bayonets, drove the tumultuous mass inside the fort, and seized the guard-room, which commanded the main entrance. I then placed sentinels to prevent the crowd from encroaching on us. As soon as we had disembarked, the boats were sent back for Seymour’s company. The major landed soon after in one of the engineer boats, which had coasted

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along to avoid the steamer. Seymour’s men arrived in safety, followed soon after by the remaining detachments, which had been left behind as a rear-guard. The latter, however, ran a good deal of risk, for in the dark it passed almost under the bow of the guard-boat Nina. The whole movement was successful beyond our most sanguine expectations, and we were highly elated. The signal-gun was fired, and Hall at once sailed over, and landed the soldiers’ families and supplies. As soon as the schooners were unloaded, the disloyal workmen were placed on board and shipped off to the main-land. Only a few of the best and most reliable were retained.”

The Confederate Peace Commission had been meeting with several justices of the United States Supreme Court and Secretary of State Seward who had continually assured them that Fort Sumter, now recognized as the federal fort being held in Charleston, would be evacuated. This made clear that there was simply no connection being made in Washington – or Charleston for that matter! – that Anderson and his men had left Moultrie and invested Sumter, something that should have been of considerable interest to all concerned. To justify his eventual actions, Lincoln began distributing stories to sympathetic Northern newspapers that the Federal troops at Sumter were near starvation and in desperate need of provisions, an outright lie refuted by the communications and records of Major Anderson himself. Additionally, the merchants in Charleston continued selling foodstuffs to the garrison now located at Fort Sumter as they had done at Fort Moultrie. Nonetheless, Lincoln’s lies worked and there was public outrage in the North over the “starving” troops at Sumter. Lincoln knew he needed Northern public opinion behind him to engage in a war with the South and the idea of starving federal soldiers was extremely useful in that effort!

On March 9<sup>th</sup>, Lincoln proposed that Sumter be reinforced but his Cabinet overwhelmingly opposed the action believing (accurately!) that it would lead to war. He failed again on March 15<sup>th</sup> but was finally successful in gaining

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his Cabinet’s approval on March 29 despite the fact that all involved knew the attempt would lead to war. On April 6<sup>th</sup> Lincoln gave the fatal order to reinforce Fort Sumter ordering a force of three warships to Charleston with an estimated date of arrival of April 15<sup>th</sup>. President Jefferson Davis was aware of all this activity and wanted desperately to avoid being forced to fire the first shot – Lincoln’s exact strategy. Yet legally the aggressor in such an action is not necessarily the side *firing* the first shot but the side *causing the first shot to be fired!* But such incidental details would be neither known nor considered by the people of the United States if their flag were fired upon and Lincoln knew that it would be a great boost to his war plans if the South appeared the aggressor!

On April 9, the commander in Charleston, Gen. Beauregard sent emissaries to Fort Sumter to demand surrender and evacuation of the facility, but Anderson, indicated that he was honor bound to resist. **At 4:30 A.M. on April 12<sup>th</sup>, after sending word that firing upon the already neglected installation was about to begin so as to avoid casualties to the men who had taken refuge there, a sort of “bombardment” was initiated that was militarily more akin to a battleship firing a shot across the bow of another ship whose attention was being demanded! Indeed, during the entire period of this rather uninspired shelling – some 30-odd hours – there was not one single Union casualty!** Considering the condition of Sumter as indicted by the civilian workers who had been engaged to virtually rebuild it, the only casualties occurred after the surrender when Anderson’s men fired a salute as they lowered their flag and an ember fell into some gunpowder, the explosion resulting in one death and five injuries.

But Lincoln now had what he wanted and the news of Confederates firing on the American flag was quickly distributed to Northern newspapers with the resulting fervor to punish the South that he had anticipated as the outcome of the whole matter. Lincoln had maneuvered the Confederate leaders into

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firing the first shot knowing that this act would inflame the passions of the North, and allow him to open hostilities against states that sought only a peaceful departure from the old compact. Indeed, Lincoln admitted that he had obtained his desired result in a letter to Gustavus Fox on May 1st, 1861 in which he wrote:

“You and I both anticipated that the cause of the country would be advanced by making the attempt to provision Ft. Sumter, even if it should fail; and it is no small consolation now to feel that our anticipation is justified by the result.”



The “result” and the “cause of the country” Lincoln wanted to advance was the bloody war that the firing on Sumter initiated. On July 3rd of that same year, Lincoln confided to close personal friend Orville H. Browning about his “plan” to supply and reinforce Sumter and its *raison d’etre*:

“The plan succeeded. They attacked Sumter – and it fell, and thus did more service than it otherwise could.”

President Jefferson Davis later stated: “**The order for the sending of the fleet *was a declaration of war*. The responsibility is on their shoulders, not on ours.**” Davis was right, but the fact that the North won the war Lincoln began meant that it got to write the War’s history. And so, Mr. Lincoln got the war he wanted and schoolchildren are taught that the war started because the Union manned Fort Sumter was fired upon without provocation by Southern forces. How very sad for both truth *and* history.