

The Anderson Papers
Literary Club
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“Fort Sumter, S.C.
April 5, 1861

My Dear Brother,

I presume that you are long since tired of seeing from the heading of my letters that I am still a prisoner in Ft. Sumter, but as it cannot last much longer, and as I feel, this morning, that I must unburden my head to some one, I think that you will bear with me awhile.”

So began the letter from Major Robert Anderson, Commanding Officer at Fort Sumter, Charleston Harbor, South Carolina, written to his brother, Larz Anderson, Cincinnati and fellow Literarian, seven days before the start of the Civil War.

Major Anderson had been “burdened” for over one hundred days since leading his command from the indefensible Fort Moultrie on the South Carolina coastline to Fort Sumter on December 26th, 1860. The move was necessitated by the hostile posture of the South Carolinians following the State’s secession from the Union earlier in December. The “burden” had been intensifying each day since late December as Anderson’s provisions diminished and the number of Confederate forces surrounding the Charleston Harbor increased.

Major Anderson had advised the outgoing Buchanan administration of the limits of his provisions immediately upon arrival at Fort Sumter, “as to my provisions, I say, I have provisions enough to last my command four months.” Therefore, as of the 5th of April, his provisions, flour and bread especially, were nearly exhausted.

He had advised the Buchanan and Lincoln administrations throughout the one hundred days that the South Carolina forces were amassing prior to his move to Fort Sumter on December 26th saying to Larz:

“I have kept the Govt fully advised of what was going on. On the 22nd Dec – four days before I came over, in speaking of this place I said, if I was then with my command I would be safe, until they should erect works outside of me. On the 30th and 31st Dec I told the Govt they have established posts around us and that they are commencing a battery or batteries. But the 6th Jan I told them then that it will take a powerful fleet to force its way in, in consequence of the battery they are erecting or have erected. And I have kept the Govt advised, from day to day, of what has been going on around us...”

With diminishing supplies and increasing pressure from the amassing Confederate troops, Major Anderson was left with little guidance from his superiors, other than the consistent order, first from his superiors in the Buchanan administration, and then from the Lincoln administration, that he not initiate any engagement with the Confederate forces. Again, to Larz:

“(The letter strictly confidential and of the nature of which no one here has the slightest idea) The orders by Maj. Buell are ‘you are carefully to avoid any act which would needlessly tend to provoke aggression; and for that reason you are not, without evident and imminent necessity, to take up any position which could be construed into the assumption of a hostile attitude.’ In the letter of Feb. 23d the Secy says further ‘In my letter to you of the 10th Jan, I said you will continue as heretofore to act strictly on the defensive and to avoid by all means compatible with the safety of your command a collision with the hostile force by which you are surrounded.’”

President Lincoln stressed the policy of non-aggression in his Inaugural Address made on March 4, 1861, in the middle of Anderson’s confinement at Fort Sumter, when the President stated:

“In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow-countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The Government will not assail you. You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors. You have no oath registered in heaven to destroy the Government, while I shall have the most solemn one to "preserve, protect, and defend it."

It should be said here, that it was not Anderson’s imprisonment from which he sought to be “unburdened” in his letter to Larz. Anderson may have found solace in his “prison” knowing that his father had also been imprisoned in the Charleston Harbor. In fact, his father, Richard Anderson, as an officer in the Continental Army, was captured during the Battle of Charleston in 1780 and imprisoned for over 8 months on a British ship in that same Charleston Harbor, after which he was safely released in a prisoner exchange. No, it was not the one hundred days of confinement that burdened Anderson. He was “burdened” by the fact that he had less than ten days of supplies, a fact known by all who could read a newspaper printed in English. He was further “burdened by the realization that the Confederate forces were mounting in Charleston and its environs. He was “burdened” further by the belief that the Lincoln administration would take no part in his release if it involved even the appearance of an aggressive posture against the Confederates. He knew that he faced heavy conflict, and that it was up to him to formulate the conflict plan and the resolution. This was a burden from which he sought relief in his letter written to Larz, as the hour of conflict was at hand:

“Thus, my darling brother, I have hurried over some of these facts in relation to myself – I have been severely tried, and expect that my trials are not yet over – tis said that I am to be left here, when they know that my supplies are nearly exhausted to get out of the harbour as best I may – that the Administration cannot and will not do anything showing a recognition of the fact of the existence of the Southern Confederacy – and this, when they know that I cannot send or receive a letter except through the courtesy of the authorities of S. Carolina – when they know that a vessel of War, having our flag, will not be permitted to come to the mouth of the Harbor.”

But the greatest “burden” born by Major Anderson in that eleventh hour, was an inner conflict. As an officer with almost forty years of service in the military, he understood his duty. He would follow his orders. He made this point quite clear in the letter, explaining to his brother that he had carried out his secret orders, despite public outcry against him in the North. He had remained passive to repeated bombardment of Northern ships entering the Charleston Harbor. The first such attack occurred on January 9, 1860, when the U.S. ship *Star of the West* was fired upon by the Confederate guns in Charleston as it crossed into the main entrance of the Charleston Harbor. The ship withdrew without harm, but Anderson’s only action was to complain in a communiqué to Governor Pickens stating:

“To His Excellency the Governor of South Carolina: "SIR,—Two of your batteries fired this morning on an unarmed vessel bearing the flag of my government. As I have not been notified that war has been declared by South Carolina against the United States, I can not but think this a hostile act, committed without your sanction or authority. Under that hope I refrain from opening fire on your batteries.”

A second incident occurred weeks after the attack upon the *Star of the West* in which a ship, entering the Charleston Harbor, this time in error, was fired upon by the Confederate guns, with no response from Fort Sumter. In his letter to Larz, Major Anderson recognized the effect of his passive posture which he had maintained pursuant to his orders:

“The newspapers will, even by this time, have told you that I have permitted another of our flags to be fired upon, and that I tamely and, maybe, they will say, cowardly submitted to the insult. Let me begin by saying that striving to do what may be, I humbly hope, acceptable to God, I care very little whether the people are pleased with it or not — now why did I not fire? My orders are (and orders given Feb. 23d — six weeks after the “Star of the West” had been fired upon and when the Govt knew full well, that in consequence of the orders issued here, there was a daily risk of the recurrence of the same thing) ... The facts, in reference to the attempt the destroy the vessel alluded to, are briefly these — a schooner from Boston bound to Savannah loaded with ice, mistaking this for the entrance to Sav. Was coming in, as she passed the batteries at Morris Island, they fired three or four shots ahead of her — the Capt not knowing that he ought to round to, hoisted his flag, thinking the guns were intended to make him do so and still kept on — they then fired at him, he turned and ran out, the batteries cowardly continuing to fire — and anchored out of their reach. I suppose more than 20 shots were fired. I determined, before deciding what I would do, to send to him and see whether he was injured — I did so and ascertained that only one shot hit, and that passed through her sail. — ... Thousands will say, what a pity that Anderson did not fire — such a chance for establishing a reputation he will never have again... I knew when I refused to let my officers fire, that such would be the feeling of thousands. But I looked far beyond the popularity of the hour to do my duty, as I trust, from higher, better motives.”

On the one hand, therefore, the “burden” of conflict arose from his sense of “duty” as an officer, to follow orders. He had not tendered his resignation as had many of his fellow officers, but had remained in the US Army. But his lifetime of personal experience directly conflicted with his loyalty to the chain of command. Not only was he a Kentuckian, but his family had been, for generations, Virginians. He was born in 1805 in Louisville, Kentucky, and lived there until his departure for the US Military Academy in 1821. His father and mother were Kentuckians by choice, having moved to Louisville from Virginia. Thus he had strong ties to the South. But of greater significance, were the bonds that he had forged with so many of the officers and men surrounding him in Confederate uniform. He had fought many faceless enemies in his years as an Army officer, with exemplary service in the Seminole Wars of the 1830’s and the Mexican War in the 1840’s. He was wounded at the battle of Molino del Rey in the Mexican War in 1847. But he was now confronted with a force comprised, not of faceless enemies, but of former troops, and fellow Army officers with whom he fought side by side. He had forged bonds with many of these men in combat, and the bonds forged in combat are strong. The “burden” of this inner conflict between, on the one hand, the call to action compelled by his standing orders and the impending situation, and on the other, the bond to those who confronted him, was sharpened by the understanding that future actions were in his control and would not be initiated by his superiors. Thus to Larz he wrote:

“It cannot be that with knowledge of all these things the Govt can now say they will not recognize the fact of the dissolution of our Union. The fact is too well established – and the sooner it is acknowledged at Washington the better. Should shortsighted and fanatical counsels prevail – other states will drop off and our late glorious Union will be among the things that have passed. God grant that this may not take place. My heart is sickened – it is sad and heavy.”

The developments of the following week are, in large part, known by all. On April 12, 1861, Fort Sumter came under attack and after over 34 hours of constant bombardment, was surrendered to the Confederate forces. Thus began the Civil War which would last for just under four years and be the bloodiest conflict in America’s history.

Although a postscript to the letter to Larz on April 5th, the events of those seven days tell a more personal story of Major Anderson and the men beside whom he had fought so gallantly for so many years during his army career. As stated in his letter to his brother, as of the 5th, Anderson would have had less than ten days of supplies, was heavily outmanned, and was specifically ordered to maintain a defensive posture, with no instructions or support authorizing his withdrawal.

What Anderson does not mention in that letter is that Brigadier-General Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard, the commanding officer of the Confederate forces in Charleston, was one of Anderson’s most respected students when Anderson was an Instructor of Artillery at the U.S. Military Academy in 1838. Beauregard, primarily an Engineer, had accepted Anderson’s request to remain after graduation and assist Anderson in the instruction of Artillery to the younger cadets. Anderson and Beauregard had both served as officers in the Mexican War. Both were well prepared to conduct an extended and devastating artillery barrage. They knew exactly how to do so with the greatest effect.

Also significant as a postscript, is that fact that Anderson, his seventy-five troops and ten officers defended Fort Sumter in heavy fighting for 34 hours. Upon the cessation of the attack, according to Anderson's subsequent communiqué to the U.S. Secretary of War,

“the quarters were entirely burned, the main gates destroyed by fire, the gorge walls seriously injured, the magazine surrounded by flames, and its door closed for the effects of heat.”

And finally, despite the intense bombardment by both sides, no Union or Confederate soldiers were killed from enemy fire. Of the forces in Fort Sumter, there were only a few who suffered injuries sustained during the combat, one of whom was Lt. Norman J. Hall who burned off both eyebrows while securing a new staff and flag when the original staff snapped, causing the Stars and Stripes to fall, momentarily.

Keeping this in mind, the communiqués between Anderson and Beauregard, leading up to and following the bombardment, are most telling of the relationship between the two commanders, and of an apparent silent script to which they were adhering. At some point after completing his letter to Larz, Anderson must have devised a plan whereby he could “unburden” himself. In this plan, Anderson avoided the imminent starvation of his troops, obeyed the only consistent orders from his superiors, which were to maintain only a defensive posture, and respond only if fired upon, while honoring the bond forged among fellow soldiers, now on opposite sides of a developing conflict:

“April 11, 1861

To: Maj. Robert Anderson

Commanding at Fort Sumter, Charleston Harbor, S.C

Sir: The Government of the Confederate States has hitherto forbore from any hostile demonstration against Fort Sumter, in the hope that the Government of the United States, with a view to the amicable adjustment of all questions between the two Governments, and to avert the calamities of war, would voluntarily evacuate it. I am ordered by the Government of the Confederate States to demand the evacuation of the Fort Sumter....

I am, sir, very respectfully, your obedient servant,

G.T. Beauregard,

Brigadier-General, Commanding”

To which Major Anderson responded:

“General: I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your communication demanding the evacuation of this fort, and to say, in reply thereto, that it is a demand with which I regret that my sense of honor, and of my obligations to my Government, prevent my compliance. Thanking you for the fair, manly, and courteous terms proposed, and for the high compliment paid me.

I am, general, very respectfully, your obedient servant,
Robert Anderson,
Major, First Artillery, Commanding.”

Overlooking even the flowery prose of the time, the respect being paid by each to the other reflected some level of decorum, well beyond mere courtesy. This continued, as Beauregard responded later in that same day of 11 April:

“Major: In consequence of the verbal observation made by you to my aides, Messrs Chestnut and Lee, in relation to the condition of your supplies, and that you would in a few days be starved out if our guns did not batter you to pieces, or word to that effect, and desiring no useless effusion of blood, I communicated both the verbal observations and your written answer to my communication to my Government.

If you will state the time at which you will evacuate Fort Sumter, and agree that in the mean time you will not use your guns against us unless ours shall be employed against Fort Sumter, we will abstain from opening fire upon you....

I remain, major, very respectfully, your obedient servant,
G.T. Beauregard,
Brigadier-General, Commanding”

In her *Diary From Dixie*, Mary Boykin Chesnut, wife of Beauregard’s aide-de-camp, James Chesnut Jr., said of her husband, upon his return home on the evening of the 11th :

“His interview with Colonel Anderson had been deeply interesting but he was not inclined to be communicative, and wanted his dinner. He felt for Anderson. He had telegraphed to President Davis for instructions as to what answer to give Anderson. He has now gone back to Fort Sumter with additional instructions.”

Noting the precondition, that Anderson state a time of departure, or be fired upon, the Major responded just after midnight on the 12th of April, in what appears to be a recognition that the Fort will be fired upon if not evacuated immediately. Anderson’s response:

“General: I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt by Colonel Chestnut of your second communication of the 11th instant, and to state in reply that, cordially uniting with you in the desire to avoid the useless effusion of blood, I will, if provided with the proper and necessary means of transportation, evacuate Fort Sumter by noon on the 15th instant, and that I will not in the mean time open my fires upon your forces unless compelled to do so by some hostile act against this fort or the flag of my Government by the forces under your command, or by some portion of them, or by the perpetration of some act

showing a hostile intention on your part against this fort or the flag it bears, should I not receive prior to that time controlling instructions from my Government or additional supplies.”

The response to this communiqué was immediate, coming as it did at 3:20 am on the 12th of April, from the General’s Aides-de-Camp Chesnut and Lee. It read:

“Sir: by authority of Brigadier-General Beauregard, commanding the Provisional Forces of the Confederate States, we have the honor to notify you that he will open the fire of batteries on Fort Sumter in one hour from this time.”

And so began the Civil War, when at 4 :20 am, the Confederate forces opened fire upon Fort Sumter. The battle continued for over 34 hours into the afternoon of April 13.

In her *Diary From Dixie*, for the entry of Saturday, April 13, 1861, Mary Chesnut noted:

“Nobody hurt, after all. How gay we were last night. Reaction after the dread of all the slaughter, we thought those dreadful cannons were making such a noise in doing. Not even a battery the worse for wear.

Fort Sumter has been on fire. He (Anderson) has not yet silenced any of our guns, or so the aids – still with swords and red sashes by way of uniform - tell us. But the sound of those guns makes regular meals impossible. None of us go to table, but tea trays pervade the corridors going everywhere. Some of the anxious hearts lie in their beds and moan in solitary misery.”

And then, after almost a day and a half of firing, at 20 minutes past 2 o’clock on Saturday April 13, 1861, Major Anderson sent the following communiqué to Beauregard:

“General: I thank you for your kindness in having sent your aid to me with an offer of assistance upon your having observed that our flag was down – it being down a few moments, and merely long enough to enable us to replace it on another staff. Your aides will inform you of the circumstance of the visit to my fort by General Wigfall, who said he came with message from yourself.

In the peculiar circumstances in which I am now placed in consequence of that message, and of my reply thereto, I will now state that I am willing to evacuate this fort upon the terms and conditions offered by yourself on the 11th instant, at any hour you may name to-morrow, or as soon as we can arrange means of transportation, I will not replace my flag until the return of your message.”

Four hours later, the General responded:

“Sir: On being informed that you were in distress, caused by a conflagration in Fort Sumter, I immediately dispatched my aides, Colonels Miles and Pryor, and Captain Lee, to offer you any assistance in my power to give.

Learning a few moments afterwards that a white flag was waiving on our ramparts, I sent two others of my aides, Colonel Allston and Major Jones, to offer you the following

terms of evacuation: All proper facilities for the removal of yourself and command, together with company arms and private property, to any point within the United States you may select.

Apprised that you desire the privilege of saluting your flag on retiring, I cheerfully concede it, in consideration of the gallantry with which you have defended the place under your charge.

The Catawba steamer will be at the landing of Sumter to-morrow morning at any hour you may designate for the purpose of transporting you whither you may desire.”

On the following day, Anderson and all but one of his troops departed Fort Sumter. One man had been killed by the premature discharge of a cannon during the salute to the Stars and Stripes as it was being lowered prior to departure. This man, being the first of the Union Army killed in the Civil War, but not at the hands of the Confederacy.

Anderson, upon his return to the North, was immediately promoted to Brigadier General. He served for a short time as Commanding Officer of U.S. troops in Kentucky, until he was relieved later in 1861 from that command, replaced by Brigadier-General William T. Sherman. He remained in the Army until his retirement on October 27, 1863, but saw no further combat in the War.

This paper ends, with Major Anderson’s final words to his brother, Larz.

“I thank God, that when I think of Him and his mercies, I am quieted down – as I know it will all end right. – I must now close as I have a troublesome official letter to write– give my warmest love to all, In haste, your loving brother Robert Anderson”.