

# Crossing the Bar

**\*\*Crossing the Bar: The Demon of Unrest\*\***

On January 8, the *Star of the West* was met with unexpectedly fine weather while navigating toward its destination. The officer in charge, Lieutenant Woods, unknowingly distributed guns and ammunition to the troops, oblivious to the revelation that their mission had been canceled. As the ship drew closer to Charleston at midnight, Captain John McGowan ordered all lights extinguished to avoid detection. Despite the darkness, which was further compounded by a new moon, the soldiers were allowed on deck.

As they entered the Charleston Bar, McGowan found the harbor lighthouses darkened and a crucial navigational buoy missing. He resorted to sounding—an ancient method of measuring depth by lowering a weighted line into the water—until dawn revealed a light that he deduced was from Fort Sumter. Woods later described their approach as “groping in the dark,” reflecting the uncertainty of their navigation. They proceeded cautiously, waiting for daylight before attempting to cross the bar, aware that an ebb tide was complicating their efforts.

At daybreak, a nearby steamer, clearly on watch, prompted McGowan to keep the *Star of the West*'s flag visible. The steamer signaled with blue and red lights, demanding identification but when McGowan remained silent, it crossed into the harbor, firing rockets. As they neared the entrance, both Fort Sumter and Fort Moultrie came into view, with Fort Sumter displaying an American flag.

The lookouts spotted a large red palmetto flag on Morris Island, indicating the presence of a hidden battery of five cannons, manned by cadets from a nearby smallpox hospital. Captain Abner Doubleday at Fort Sumter was alone that morning and was aware of the cannon's purpose to protect the shipping channel rather than attack Sumter. Despite rumors of the *Star of the West*'s mission, Doubleday felt it implausible that the government would send a mere transport vessel in such a situation.

However, as he scanned the horizon, he saw the steamer approaching with the United States flag aloft. Just then, a cannon fired from the battery on Morris Island, landing in the channel ahead of the ship, seemingly to deter its progress. Yet, the *Star of the West* continued forward, with a large United States garrison flag raised, prompting Doubleday to hurry to notify Major Anderson of the unfolding events.