

A Boat in the Dark

In the early hours of April 12, 1861, amidst a tumultuous stormy night, a boat carrying four enslaved rowers approached Fort Sumter, conveying three Confederate officers. As they rowed through choppy waters from Charleston, they reached the fort, now transformed from a relic into a formidable stronghold under Major Robert Anderson. However, the fort was significantly undermanned with only seventy-five soldiers defending against a backdrop of mounting tensions over dwindling food supplies cut off by Confederate authorities.

Major Anderson, a clean-shaven, devoted family man, faced the grim prospect of surrender. He was separated from his wife, Eliza (Eba), and their young children, living in a luxurious hotel, the Brevoort House, while he commanded Fort Sumter. Their daughters attended a boarding school to ease Eba's burdens, as she suffered from a chronic illness. Anderson, deeply religious, frequently prayed for peace and to be reunited with his family. Despite being cordial with General P.G.T. Beauregard, his former pupil and Confederate commander across the harbor, Anderson's resolve to withstand siege was tested by the dire circumstances.

Charleston was an epicenter of the domestic slave trade, with a significant population of enslaved people, creating unease among the city's white residents. The planters of South Carolina, regarded themselves as an aristocracy steeped in notions of chivalry, illustrating their social status through lavish lifestyles and adherence to strict codes of honor. Yet the state seemed increasingly behind the times, resisting the advancement represented by the burgeoning railroad age.

As the Confederate officers conveyed their ultimatum, Anderson deliberated with his officers about the fort's defense capabilities. They agreed that they could last five days without supplies. In his message back to the Confederate leaders, Anderson affirmed an evacuation plan in three days provided no additional orders came from the government.

This agreement, however, was complicated by the arrival of Union supplies heading toward Fort Sumter, creating tension for the Confederate leaders, who feared the need to act swiftly. The night was filled with warnings of impending conflict, indicating a precarious situation that could ignite the Civil War. Mary Boykin Chesnut, observing the feverish atmosphere around her in Charleston, noted an unsettling mixture of festivities and anxiety, presaging the siege to come .