

A Proper Commander

In November 1860, Colonel John L. Gardner, the commander of U.S. Army forces in Charleston, South Carolina, faced mounting anxiety as tensions escalated over the secession movement. Gardner was responsible for several key military installations, most notably Fort Moultrie on Sullivan's Island, which had historical ties to Edgar Allan Poe. The political climate intensified concerns that local citizens might attempt to seize Fort Moultrie, which was poorly fortified and uniquely vulnerable to internal threats. The fort was designed primarily to guard against foreign naval attacks and had little defense against a potential assault from its rear, where impeding sand hills offered favorable positions for enemy sharpshooters.

Historically low troop numbers and inadequate supplies compounded Gardner's troubles. He expressed worries in correspondence regarding the civilian workers at the forts, who far outnumbered his soldiers and expressed indifference towards secession based on monetary incentives. Gardner feared the workers might turn against the fort on a bribe. He requested additional troops to help secure the posts. Meanwhile, higher Army officials recognized Gardner's incompetence and planned to replace him with Major Robert Anderson, a dedicated officer who had previously served at Fort Moultrie and demonstrated both loyalty to the Union and knowledge of local dynamics.

Upon assuming command on November 21, 1860, Anderson sought to foster a friendly atmosphere, welcoming local citizens to the fort. However, he quickly identified critical weaknesses within the fortifications and echoed Gardner's plea for reinforcements at Fort Sumter and Castle Pinckney. Anderson believed that a strong defense posture was the best deterrent to potential aggression from local secessionists.

Despite attempts to maintain a civil relationship with Charleston's citizens, disturbances deepened, exemplified by a parade of young militia members that publicized their secession agenda. In his reports, Anderson noted the ominous prelude to conflict, declaring that the long-looming storm of war was near, as preparations intensified for an inevitable confrontation over federal authority in the South .