

The Major Gets an Idea

In the chapter titled "The Major Gets an Idea," the narrative unfolds around Capt. John G. Foster of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, responsible for bolstering defenses in Charleston Harbor during the tense days following South Carolina's secession in December 1860. Foster, a thirty-seven-year-old veteran with a distinctive appearance and a limp from past combat, had been independently working to reinforce Fort Sumter and Fort Moultrie. His efforts included hiring civilian workers to dig a wet ditch around Fort Moultrie and erecting defenses to protect against potential infantry attacks. He also initiated plans to enable Major Anderson at Fort Sumter to blow up the fort if secessionist forces took over.

Foster recognized the critical need to arm his workforce, countering a request for forty muskets from the federal arsenal. This act, while logical in his view, risked escalating tensions as the arsenal's commander, Col. Benjamin Huger, had promised South Carolina's governor to withhold weapons. A telegram from War Secretary Floyd emphasized the gravity of the situation, ordering Foster to return any removed arms, which he complied with, fearing the implications of conflict.

Simultaneously, a letter from Floyd to Major Anderson cast doubt on the government's commitment to keeping the forts. Floyd, who faced accusations of corruption and betrayal, modified earlier orders indicating that defending the forts might entail a "useless sacrifice." His words suggested surrender in the face of overwhelming opposition, a stark contradiction to previous directives to defend the forts at all costs. Floyd's communication further reinforced Anderson's suspicions of treasonous intent.

Realizing that Fort Sumter was the only defensible position left, Anderson contemplated moving his troops from Moultrie to Sumter, recognizing potential backlash from South Carolina officials. Despite his plan, he chose to keep this decision private from his officers as he prepared for the imminent changes in the precarious political landscape unfolding around them.