

Rumor and Cannon Fire

Rumor and cannon fire swept through Charleston on April 9, as Mary Chesnut, despite battling a bad cold, was preparing to return to her Mulberry plantation. Initially hesitant to leave, a visit from her friend Robert Gourdin persuaded her to change her mind. Their conversation took an unexpected turn when John Manning entered the room with dramatic news, declaring that "your country is invaded." He claimed that six warships were positioned off the coast, and messengers Talbot and Chew brought more unsettling news of impending war. However, this alarming announcement was later revealed to be based on a misunderstanding, largely due to poor visibility caused by a storm. The supposed sighting of the warships was simply a product of misinterpretation and panic.

Mary, eager to confirm the information, quickly shared the news with her husband, Mr. C, who added to the growing tension by agreeing with the alarming claims. The conversation was further fueled when a man named Wigfall arrived, quoting the works of poet Lord Byron, adding a touch of literary gravitas to the already chaotic atmosphere. As the conversation unfolded, Mary's anxiety intensified. She and Mrs. W retreated to her room, where they discussed the potential horrors of the Civil War that seemed on the verge of erupting. Their thoughts were abruptly interrupted as distant cannon fire echoed across the town, followed by the unmistakable shouts of soldiers preparing for conflict.

By 11 p.m., the rain had begun to fall heavily, but the sound of six cannon blasts pierced through the town, sending waves of fear through the citizens. Mary crossed paths with Mrs. Allen Green, who appeared visibly shaken by the events. Former Governor John Means approached Mary with the latest news, informing her that Governor Pickens had ordered seven cannon blasts, signaling the 17th Regiment to mobilize. The blasts were meant to gather the regiment for transport to Morris Island, where they awaited the presumed Union assault. This communication was not just a warning, but a call to action, emphasizing the imminent nature of the conflict. The city's atmosphere was one of growing tension, as soldiers prepared for a potential confrontation, with their resilience being tested by the rumors of Union ships just beyond the horizon.

The sound of the cannon, combined with the fervent activity in the streets, created a sense of urgency that gripped the town. Mary, reflecting on the events, noted the sleepless night that followed, filled with the sounds of shouting soldiers and the hurried marching of troops. The chaos of the moment was palpable, and the tension in the air

was almost tangible. Meanwhile, Edmund Ruffin, stationed on Morris Island, observed the heightened excitement among Charleston's inhabitants, all aware that the first shots of the Civil War might be fired any moment. The city, already on edge, felt the weight of history closing in as preparations were made, and everyone anticipated the violent escalation that seemed inevitable. The combination of rumors, cannon fire, and the restless energy of a town bracing for war was a reflection of the collective anxiety that swept through Charleston in the days leading up to the war.

This chapter provides a vivid portrayal of the confusion and uncertainty that preceded the first major conflict of the Civil War. The blending of rumors, heightened expectations, and military preparations paints a picture of a society on the brink of an inevitable clash. The events described show how misinformation, coupled with the tense atmosphere of impending war, could lead to widespread anxiety and fear. In a time of uncertainty, such rumors, no matter how unfounded, held power in shaping the emotional climate of a community. The experiences of Mary Chesnut offer a glimpse into the mindset of those living through the chaos of the Civil War's early days, highlighting the confusion, fear, and anticipation that would define this pivotal moment in American history.

As Charleston braced for the uncertainty of war, the confusion created by rumors and cannon fire only fueled the tension that would soon explode into full-scale conflict. The city, filled with anxious citizens and nervous soldiers, was poised for a battle that would define the course of the nation's history. The unexpected delay of the warships, combined with the increasing number of cannon blasts, intensified the sense of urgency, underscoring the fragile nature of peace in the moments leading up to a war that would leave a lasting mark on the country. This chapter serves as a reminder of the volatility of history, where the smallest rumors and the loudest cannon fire could change the course of a nation.