

The Flirtation

The flirtation between Mary Chesnut and John Manning began on March 30, when James Chesnut, accompanied by fellow men, ventured out to explore the forts in Charleston Harbor. Mary decided to remain behind, troubled by the strong winds and dust on the islands. Upon returning to her rooms, she was greeted with a bouquet of roses from friends and anticipated a peaceful Saturday. However, her quiet afternoon was disrupted by a loud knock at the door. When she opened it, she was met by John Manning, who had mistakenly knocked on the wrong door. He invited her to join their gathering at Quinby's, a well-known photography studio, where portraits were being taken. Mary agreed, and the two spent the day touring the city in an open carriage, making various social calls. Mary initially referred to Manning as "my handsome ex-governor" in her diary but later revised it to simply "the."

Meanwhile, James returned from his excursion in a foul mood, accusing Mary of staying behind to flirt with Manning. Mary, frustrated and upset, went to bed distressed over the accusation, feeling misunderstood. Despite the tension between them, she could not ignore the growing connection she felt with Manning, which had started as a simple social interaction but was beginning to stir conflicting emotions. The following evening, General Beauregard visited their home, but Mary chose not to greet him, remarking in her diary that he was being celebrated as a hero despite his relatively low rank as a captain. The events of the day did little to ease James's foul mood. On March 31, the day after the social gathering, James's displeasure lingered, and tensions at home only worsened. They had friends over for tea, including some relatives and acquaintances with complicated histories. In the midst of this, John Manning took the opportunity to speak with Mary privately, which only further fueled James's displeasure.

As these personal dynamics unfolded in Charleston, the political situation around Fort Sumter continued to escalate. Governor Pickens, located at the Charleston Hotel, expressed growing impatience regarding the status of the fort. He had received assurances from President Lincoln's emissary, Ward Lamon, about the fort's imminent evacuation, but so far, nothing had occurred. Pickens communicated these details to the Confederate commissioners in Washington, further igniting discussions about the fort's future. Meanwhile, Secretary of State William Seward found himself caught between conflicting messages, as he had informed the commissioners that an impending surrender was possible, but his cabinet favored a different approach. This left the situation in a precarious state, with the promise to update the commissioners on April 1 adding further uncertainty. The contrast between the private social intrigues of Mary and Manning and the escalating political crisis surrounding Fort Sumter highlighted the tension between personal desires and the larger forces at play, with both creating a sense of anticipation that could not be easily resolved.

Mary's interactions with Manning, coupled with the growing political turmoil, underscored the complexity of life in Charleston during this period. On one hand, there were the personal dynamics, such as her flirtation with Manning, which added emotional complexity to her daily life. On the other hand, there were the rapidly developing political tensions, which had the potential to disrupt the lives of everyone involved. Mary's personal turmoil, alongside the uncertainty of the political landscape, painted a vivid picture of the momentous changes occurring in the South during the early days of the Civil War. Both her emotional responses to Manning's advances and the political climate surrounding Fort Sumter were reflective of the larger unrest brewing throughout the nation, where personal and national struggles were becoming increasingly intertwined. The growing sense of conflict in both spheres provided a powerful backdrop to the unfolding drama, as Charleston stood on the precipice of war, with its inhabitants caught between their private concerns and the political events shaping their futures.