

Why Did the Confederacy Take the First Shot of the Civil War?

"[Do not bomb] needlessly [and] avoid the effusion of blood." [If Anderson does not agree to surrender and come out peacefully], reduce the fort as your judgment decides to be most practicable."

*Confederate Secretary of War LeRoy Pope Walker to Brigadier General P. G. T. Beauregard, April 10, 1861*¹

When South Carolina seceded on December 20, 1860 (triggered by Lincoln's election that past November), it began taking control of all federal property within its borders. This was to include the military posts in Charleston Harbor – Ft. Sumter, Ft. Moultrie, and Castle Pinckney (an arsenal). These posts were controlled by a small number of US troops under the command of Major Robert Anderson², 1st US Artillery (i.e., Regular Army), who, having only recently arrived, refused to relinquish control. Meanwhile, a commission from South Carolina had been in Washington, DC attempting to negotiate the transfer of control of federal property to the government of SC. It was their understanding (apparently unbeknownst to Major Anderson, if true to any degree) that the forts would not be attacked or seized as



Major Robert Anderson
*Union Commander
Fort Sumter, April 1861*

an act of war until proper negotiations for their cession to the State had been made, *provided* they were not reinforced *and* their military status remained unchanged from the time of the understanding – December 9 or thereabouts. (Note that their transfer to SC was supported by the US Secretary of War John B. Floyd – a poor excuse for a government leader if there ever was one. He plotted and aided the transfer of federal facilities and assets across the south, and shifted some federal units around to facilitate secession. He resigned his position on December 29, triggered at least in part by Major Anderson's refusal to abandon Ft. Sumter. Floyd was a real piece of work. If anyone should have been labeled "traitor", it would be him. But, I digress.)

Major Anderson felt threatened by the build-up of SC militia forces opposing him. During the night of December 26, he evacuated Ft. Moultrie and consolidated at Ft. Sumter, which hitherto had essentially been unoccupied. SC felt this abrogated their "understanding" with Washington, DC. Tensions heightened. SC militia immediately occupied Ft. Moultrie and Castle Pinckney, and pressed their demand to Major Anderson to turn Ft. Sumter over to them; Major Anderson held firm, and a standoff ensued.

In January a civilian steamship, the *Star of the West*, hired by the Union, was readied outside the harbor to sail additional troops and relief supplies to Major Anderson's command. Again, this ran counter to the "understanding" SC thought it had had with Washington. (Keep in mind that President-elect Lincoln had not yet been sworn in; President Buchanan was still in office.) At the entrance to the harbor, on January 9, a SC militia battery (Citadel Battery No. 8, on Morris Island, one among several batteries deployed, this one manned by cadets from The Citadel) put a shot across its bow, which went

unheeded. The battery then fired at the ship itself. (The ship was only about a mile from Ft. Sumter, within easy view of the troops there.) Little damage, but this did get the ship's attention. It changed course and steamed back out of the harbor, out of range of the batteries. Some would say these are the first shots fired in the ACW – except that it wasn't a war just yet. Words and explanations were exchanged between Major Anderson and his SC militia counterparts, and a "truce" ensued.

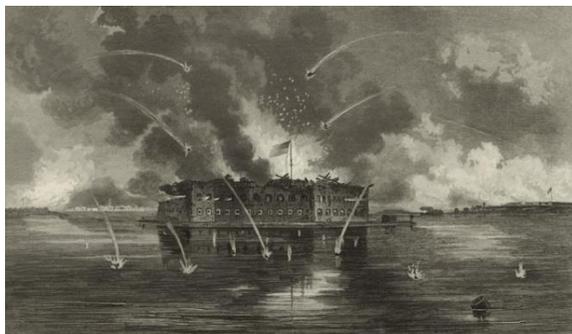
By February, six more states had seceded, and the Confederate government had convened. CS President Jefferson Davis put Brigadier General Pierre Gustave Toutant-Beauregard³, Provisional Army of the Confederate States, in command in Charleston.

He arrived on March 3. Discussions proceeded with Major Anderson, who continued to refuse to evacuate Ft. Sumter. It eventuated that in talking with messengers from Gen. Beauregard, Major Anderson mentioned that he would soon be starved into surrender. Based on that information, General Beauregard requested, by letter, that Major Anderson fix a date and time for a peaceful evacuation. Major Anderson replied that it would be noon, April 15; provided no hostile act was committed by the Confederate forces and, further, that *he should not in the meantime receive from Washington any instructions otherwise or any additional supplies.*

All seemed right with General Beauregard with the prospect of a peaceful turnover. That is until he became aware of a federal fleet assembled outside the harbor to further reinforce and resupply the garrison at Ft. Sumter.



Brigadier General Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard
Confederate Commander
Charleston, April 1861



Bombardment of Fort Sumter, April 1861
George Edward Perine (1837–1885), engraver.

President Lincoln on March 29 had ordered that relief for Ft. Sumter be made ready to depart by April 6. On that day, he sent a message to the governor of SC, read by him and by General Beauregard on April 8. In it, President Lincoln said he would *resupply only*, and if not resisted, he would make *no attempt at reinforcement* "without further notice, or in case of attack upon the fort." This runs counter to the information that General Beauregard subsequently received about the relief fleet; i.e., that it did, indeed, include reinforcements.

Reinforcements included or not, though, resupply meant US control of Ft. Sumter would continue. President Davis found this unacceptable. His patience was at an end. Ft. Sumter was a dagger aimed at the heart of the legitimacy of the Confederacy. On April 10 he ordered General Beauregard to demand the surrender of Ft. Sumter. If the federals refused, he was to use force. General Beauregard sent

representatives to Major Anderson on April 11 demanding surrender of the fort. Major Anderson immediately responded in writing that he would not. With knowledge of the relief fleet, General Beauregard at once, at 3:00am on April 12, notified Major Anderson that Confederate forces would open fire on the fort in one hour from that time.

South Carolina and, later, the CSA, were adamant that they were sovereign powers and had demanded control of all federal property within their borders. They didn't get it (the posts in Charleston Harbor were not the only facilities in the seceding states the Union didn't relinquish), and this was considered a hostile act that couldn't stand. President Lincoln's core responsibility as he saw it was the preservation of the Union. He feared that relinquishing these posts would be taken to mean he was conceding the Confederacy's independence. He would use force if necessary, but would do whatever he could to avoid being the first to fire. He deliberately delayed in Charleston Harbor in hopes that if war couldn't be avoided, at least the first shots would be fired by Confederate forces; moreover, he authorized the April relief effort to either succor Ft. Sumter or precipitate Confederate fire in an attempt to do so. This view is challenged by some historians, such as Harold Holzer and John F. Marszalek, but is accepted by others, such as William J. Cooper. I ascribe to it; it resonates. As it turned out, whether it was a deliberate provocation on President Lincoln's part or not, General Beauregard ordered his artillery to open fire at 4:00am on April 12. You know the story from there.



Confederate flag flying at Fort Sumter, Charleston Harbor on 15th April 1861

So, why did the South fire the first shots of the Civil War? President Lincoln took a slow approach in an effort preferably to stave off armed conflict but, if it was to come to war, to provoke the Confederacy into initiating it; President Davis's impatience with Ft. Sumter remaining in Union hands, believing it imperative to take control of it as soon as possible in order to demonstrate the Confederacy's sovereignty, even if it meant firing the first shot; and General Beauregard's assessment that Union relief to Ft. Sumter was imminent, which led to his promptness in carrying out President Davis' orders.

*"We shall be in one of the bloodiest civil wars that history has recorded."
Alexander Stephens, Confederate Vice President, after Fort Sumter surrender*



Notes –

¹ "Huntsville native gave order to fire on Fort Sumter", Steve Doyle (*The Huntsville Times*); *Tuscaloosaneews.com*, April 12, 2001

² Robert Anderson, was born at "Soldier's Retreat" near Louisville, Kentucky on June 14, 1805. He graduated from the U.S. Military Academy in 1825, receiving a commission in the 3rd U.S. Artillery. During the Black Hawk War of 1832, he served as a colonel of Illinois volunteers and had the distinction of mustering a young Abraham Lincoln in and out of military service. During the Second Seminole War in 1837, he was an assistant adjutant general on the staff of Winfield Scott and by 1839 he had published the manual *Instruction for Field Artillery, Horse and Foot*. Severely wounded at the Battle of Molino del Rey in September 1847, he received a brevet promotion to major, made permanent in 1857. He was assigned to Charleston Harbor in November 1860. This assignment was dictated by both military and political considerations: Anderson was a Kentucky born proslavery officer whose wife was a Georgian, but he was also highly competent and respected in his profession and his loyalty was unquestioned. Major Anderson agreed to evacuation terms and lowered the Stars and Stripes on April 14, 1861. Immediately upon emerging from Fort Sumter, Anderson found himself a national hero. Less than one week later, an estimated 100,000 people gathered in Manhattan's Union Square Park to fete Anderson and salute the 33-star flag he had rescued from the fort after its surrender. The man and the flag then went on tour across the North, recruiting military volunteers and raising funds for the war effort. He was appointed Brigadier General in the regular army by President Lincoln on May 15, 1861, but his failing health compelled him to retire from active service in 1863. On April 14, 1865, Anderson returned to Charleston for a ceremony to celebrate the war's end and the reunification of the nation. Precisely four years after it was lowered, he raised the banner over the now ruined fort. Later that night, in Washington, Abraham Lincoln was struck down by an assassin. Anderson died in Nice, France on October 26, 1871. France honored Anderson with a military funeral, after which his body was sent to the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York for interment. *Generals in Blue: Lives of the Union Commanders*, Ezra J. Warner; Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964; 7-8; and American Battlefield Trust, <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/biographies/robert-anderson>.

³ Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard was born in Saint Bernard parish Louisiana May 28, 1818, comma and was graduated 2nd in the class of 1838 at West Point. He served in the Mexican-American War as an engineer officer on General Winfield Scott's staff and received 2 brevets for gallantry. He was assigned in January 1861 as Superintendent of the Military Academy at West Point, but was relieved a few days later, probably because of his avowed southern sympathies. In February he resigned his Commission and was appointed Brigadier General, Provisional Army, CSA. On March 1, 1861 he was placed in command at Charleston and supervised the reduction of the Fort Sumter in April. Two months later at First Manassas he was second in command to General Joseph E Johnston. He was commissioned a full general in the Confederate Regular Army, to rank from July 21st, 1861. In 1862 was sent to the West where he held field army-level commands at Shiloh and Corinth. After a falling out with President Davis, he was placed in command of the defense of the South Carolina and Georgia coasts. He ably supported General Lee around Richmond and Petersburg in the latter part of 1864 and returned to the Carolinas in the closing weeks of the war. Returning to New Orleans after the surrender, he became president of two railroads and for several years was Adjutant General of the state. He died in New Orleans on February 20, 1893 and is buried there in Metairie Cemetery. *Generals in Blue: Lives of the Confederate Commanders*, Ezra J. Warner; Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959; 22-23.