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"THE FALL OF CHARLESTON"

Compiled by VIOLA CASTON FLOYD*

One hundred years ago this February, Charleston was evacuated by the Confederate troops; the Federal troops entered thereafter. Charleston was evacuated during the evening of February 17, and the early morning of February 18, 1865. With the Federal Army came a New York *Tribune* correspondent who signed himself as "Berwick". His communication written from Charleston in the first few days of the occupation was published on March 4, 1865, in the New York *Tribune*. The article, six columns long, contains approximately 8,500 words. Omitting the greater portion of the reporter's prejudiced observations the factual material is as follows:

THE FALL OF CHARLESTON

Full Account by Our Special Correspondent

Charleston, S. C., Feb. 20, 21, 22, 1865

Here beginneth the reopening of the *Tribune's* special correspondence from Charleston which has been suspended since the early period of the great Rebellion against . . . the Constitution and Government of the United States.

. . . .

IN THE BAY

We lay off the harbor for several hours before daybreak when the trip to the city was resumed. . . . To the left lay Morris Island, with Fort Wagner and Cumming's Point batteries; further off on the shore, large mounds of sand—the Rebel "Battery B", a little further up with our flag flying over it, Fort Gregg; to the right, on the low sandy shore, with one or two little groves of palmettos near by the earthworks of Fort Moultrie; between them, apparently a mass of ruins, in the middle of the stream, but really one of the most formidable fortifications in the world, was the renowned Fort Sumter; and behind it lay Castle Pinckney, with its cannon pointed at us, and the captured city, where Rebellion was begotten and born and began its career of carnage and desolation.

. . . .

* Mrs. Floyd is the author of *Lancaster County Tours* published by the Lancaster County Historical Commission in 1956. The excerpts printed above were copied from an issue of the New York *Tribune*, dated March 4, 1865, now in the possession of Ned Bailey, Funderburk Street, Lancaster, South Carolina.

FIRST APPEARANCES

The wharves looked as if they had been deserted for half a century—broken down, delapidated, grass and moss peeping up between the pavement, where once the busy feet of commerce trod incessantly. The warehouses near the river; the streets as we enter them; the houses and the stores and the public buildings—we look at them and hold our breaths in utter amazement. Every step we take increases our astonishment. No pen, no pencil, no tongue can do justice to the scene. . . . And, all around this area of desolation are the ruined houses that still stand,—“Gillmore’s Town” as the negroes call it.

. . . .

But however great our astonishment and however awestricken our thoughts were, we remembered that our first duty was to learn for our Northern readers, not what ruin had been brought here but how the city was captured.

So we hurried to the newspaper offices uptown—for their old places of business had been rendered uninhabitable by the shells which sought them out—and found them too.

A NEGRO IMAGE BREAKER

We found The Mercury office deserted—a negro family already quartered in the room which had been the editorial sanctum! In the front room there were four busts of eminent Americans—one of them Calhoun. . . . I said to the negress who showed us into the room:

“That man was your great enemy—he did all he could to keep you slaves—you ought to break his bust.”

She said nothing, and as I was occupied in examining manuscripts I did not notice that she left the room. After awhile, having finished my search, I thought that the bust of Calhoun would be a great trophy for the Tribune office, and made up my mind to “spoil the Egyptians” to that extent.

The negro woman was there and I saw that the bust had disappeared. I asked her where it was.

She had “gone done and broke it”.

THE EVACUATION

The recent movements, planned by Gen. Gillmore, along the line of Charleston and Savannah Railroad (under Brig.-Gen. Hatch) and up Bull’s Bay (a naval and military expedition under Gen. Potter) alarmed the Rebel military authorities and hastened the evacuation of the city. It was known from Rebel sources that Hardee designed to evacuate the

city but it was thought that it would take place on Wednesday, Feb. 22 or later in the week. But Potter's demonstration deceived them (for they believed that they had a very large force while in fact he had but 1,200 men) and they began to leave the city on Friday. Hardee himself left Charleston on Friday night, and the last of the Rebels took their leave on Saturday.

DESTRUCTION OF COTTON AND PUBLIC STORES

Before leaving, details of soldiers were sent to fire every building without exception in which cotton was stored. It is estimated that 2,000 bales were consumed. The western portion of Charleston suffered severely by these fires. The cotton thus destroyed belonged chiefly to the Rebel Government; but hundreds of bales, the property of citizens, shared the same fate. Thirty thousand bushels of rice, government property, and a large warehouse filled with commissary stores were also destroyed. The fire engines were brought out, but were powerless to extinguish the flames. They succeeded only in preventing it from spreading.

HORRIBLE CALAMITY

. . . Some boys discovered where a large supply of gunpowder was stored, and amused themselves with tossing large handfuls of it into the large piles of burning cotton. Suddenly the fire communicated to the magazine, and a fearful explosion took place. The scene is described as being extremely horrible. It is estimated by the citizens that upward of 150 men, women and children perished in the flames and that nearly 200 were injured, burned and wounded. Possibly this may be an exaggerated estimate. . . . This frightful calamity occurred at the North-Eastern Railroad depot, which was totally destroyed. The miserable victims were seen tumbling about in agony, literally roasting alive; their wild shrieks were appalling—and all help was impossible.

DESTRUCTION OF PRIVATE PROPERTY

The flames rapidly communicated to the adjacent buildings and four large blocks were entirely burned down. The fire ravaged Chapel, Calhoun, East Bay and Laurens sts. in the vicinity of the N. E. railroad depot. Two large brick buildings on the corner of East Bay and Laurens sts. and Minonty [Minority?] sts. were also destroyed. An hour later five buildings near the Court-House on Meeting st. were added to the list of losses by fire. The new bridge from the city to James Island [?] was similarly destroyed.

DESTRUCTION OF THE GUNBOATS

While these scenes of horror were going on, the Rebel ironclads were burning. The vessels were named the Palmetto State, the Chicora, and the Charleston. The Palmetto State exploded with a fearful noise about 9 o'clock and the Chicora followed suit shortly thereafter. The Charleston held out till 11 o'clock and then burst asunder. One of these ironclads had 20 tons of gunpowder on board and the effect of its ignition was terrific. Red hot plates were thrown as far as the wharf, and soon set them on fire. But the wharves were saved from destruction by the Fire Department. The gas works were in danger, but were successfully protected. We still have gas, therefore, such as it is—but as it is made wholly of Southern pine, it is far from being a brilliant light. The Charleston Courier of Monday (No. 20,001) mentions a curious phenomenon connected with or caused by these explosions. "The explosions," it says, "were terrific. Tremendous clouds of smoke went up forming beautiful wreaths. A full Palmetto tree, with its leaves and stems was noticed by many observers. As the last wreath of smoke disappeared the full form of the rattlesnake in the center was remarked by many as it gradually faded away."

OUR FORCES LAND

Lieut. Col. A. G. Bennett of the Twenty-first United States Colored Troops, Major John A. Hennessy and Lieut. Burr of the Fifty-second Pennsylvania Vols. and Lieut. James F. Haviland, 127th N. Y. Volunteers arrived in a boat at the front of the South Atlantic Wharf at 10 o'clock on Saturday. Col. Bennett sent the following note to the Mayor of Charleston:

A Surrender Demand
 Headquarters United States Forces
 Charleston, S. C., Feb. 18, 1865

Mayor Charles Macbeth, Charleston

Mayor: In the name of the United States Government I demand the surrender of the city of which you are the Executive officer.

Until further orders all citizens will remain within their houses.

I have the honor to be, Mayor,

Your obedient servant,

A. G. Bennett
 Lieut. Col. Commanding U. S. Forces,
 Charleston.

Before receiving this note the Mayor had sent a committee of two Aldermen to Morris Island with a formal surrender of the city. . . .

OFFICERS IN COMMAND

Gen. Schimmelpfennig commanded the Northern District of the Department of the South which extends from Charleston to Hilton Head.

Lieut. Col. Bennett is Provost Marshal and Mayor [Major?] Wiloughby, Assistant-Provost-Marshal.

VISIT TO FORT SUMTER

On Tuesday we accompanied Gens. Gillmore and Webster to Fort Sumter. Gen. Gillmore generously extended the coveted opportunity to visit the now classical ruin, to a large number of loyal ladies and gentlemen. We went out in the W. W. Coit which soon lay off the fort on the side nearest the city. A steamer had sunk near the Fort. We landed in small boats as the water was quite shallow there. The General and staff and some ladies landed in the first boat. The wall to the fort, looking toward it with back to the city, is about forty feet high, one corner being strengthened with heavy timber work outside. In the center it is perhaps about twenty-five feet high on the average. This side of course has been less damaged than those which were exposed to the fire of the batteries on Morris Island and to the fierce bombardment of the ironclads.

You enter through a very low passage way, a hundred feet or so in length, and emerge into an area of about an acre. Viewed from the inside the walls, or rather defenses, look high and are really formidable.

The fort originally was a pentagon, built of brick, stately and high. Everyone is familiar with its external appearance before the insurrection. Its siege has revolutionized the art of military engineering. It is now shown that the old style of brick or stonewall defenses are far less efficient than earthworks or lines of gabions. Gabions are large deep wicker baskets filled with earth or sea or quartz sand. The brick walls of Sumter that faced Morris Island are almost entirely demolished; but behind where they stood are layers after layers of gabions, with terraces and bomb-proofs both for soldiers on duty at the guns on the parapets and as quarters for officers and men. The defenses average, I should think, about a hundred feet in thickness. Every shell that demolished a portion of the exterior brick wall, therefore only strengthened the defenses, as it tossed the brick from positions where it was of little use to make the interior lines heavier. . . .

The bomb-proofs of the sentinels and soldiers on duty are little steep holes, down which they ran and hid themselves as soon as they saw the smoke of the guns on Morris Island, remaining there until the shell exploded. The heavy siege guns are concealed and protected beneath

these impregnable defenses, and are worked in underground galleries. The quarters of officers and men are also bomb-proofs—underground or rather underground rooms; commodious and safe if neither commanding a good view nor extremely luxurious. The area is entirely unoccupied, with the exception of a railway which runs from the entrance toward the officers quarters on the further side. To guard the fort against attack on the sides that have been battered down, there are wires stretched along the parapets, and lines of chiveaux-de-frieze at the bottom to trip up and arrest the charge of an assaulting party. The fort, which looks like a ruin, is thus stronger in its delapitude than it was in its original state. On the left side, looking from the city, heavy timber works protect the old brick walls which are there quite high, but were badly damaged by the bombardment of the monitors under Admiral Dupont.

. . . .

Our flag was hoisted at Fort Sumter on Saturday last by Capt. Bragg, a young officer of Gen. Gillmore's staff. Long may it wave there!

. . . .

Speaking of raising the flag in Charleston reminds me that Maj.-Gen. Anderson has been invited to come down and hoist the original flag over Sumter. The Rebel flag was discovered among the rubbish there. It is as torn and as rent as the Confederacy it represents.

TORPEDOES AND TORPEDO BOATS

It has been ascertained that the Rebels have a number of torpedo boats hidden in some of the creeks twenty-six miles from Charleston. . . .

The river and harbor is being dragged for torpedoes; none have been found yet. On the wharf I saw long bars of iron, about twice the thickness of railroad bars, twenty feet or more in length, with links which connected them and also held the torpedoes in position. Negroes who had worked on them said that these bars had been stretched between Fort Sumter and Sullivan's Island, but that the current was so strong that it had bent the iron and thereby displaced the torpedoes. The Rebels took them up about eleven months ago. There is no doubt whatever that the arrangements of the insurgents for a desperate defense were admirably devised, and that they meant to hold the city to the death had an attack been made from the sea. There is a masked battery at the landing, and strong forts at two or three other commanding positions.

CARTHAGE EST DELENDA¹

I write this last paragraph in the editorial rooms downtown of the Charleston Mercury. The window glass and sashes are shattered by shot. Over the mantelpiece in pencil marks are written these lines . . . :

For President in 1868
Wendell Phillips of Massachusetts
For Vice-President
Frederick Douglass of New York

Shades of Calhoun—how are the mighty fallen! Surely the great nullifier's bones must rattle in impotent rage at the overthrow of his heathen philosophy.

—Berwick.

¹ The correct Latin inscription is *Carthago delenda est*.

AN EYE WITNESS ACCOUNT OF THE OCCUPATION
OF MT. PLEASANT

February 1865

Henry Slade Tew, 1805-1884, the writer of the following letter, was a storekeeper and the Intendant (Mayor) of Mount Pleasant at the close of the War Between the States. The letter was addressed to his daughter, Emily Jenkins Tew.* He was the father of Colonel Charles Courtenay Tew, the first honor graduate of The Citadel, who was killed in action at Sharpsburg. Several years after the War H. S. Tew went to Dry Tortugas seeking his son whom he had heard was a prisoner there. He did meet Dr. Mudd while there and exchanged gifts with him.

Mount Pleasant
Feby. 26th, 1865

Dear Daughter,

Your absence from home at the time of the evacuation by our troops and the taking possession of those of the U. S. was a great relief to our minds, as our apprehension of insults and violence had been excited by the reports of such conduct elsewhere, and I have prepared this narrative or sort of diary to put you in possession of such facts as transpired and in some of which I was an actor, as may prove of interest to you at some future time may be referred to as part of the history of these eventful times.

You will recollect that for some time before you left, the City and surrounding country was in great excitement at the reports that an evacuation was intended, and these rumors and denials did not cease, up to the moment of the accomplishment of the intention.

On Thursday, the 16th Feby. about three o'clock the military began to impress all the Carts, Wagons, Horses, and Mules in the Town, and then at length all were convinced that the time was come. About 10 o'clock that night Mr. Porcher came to my house, having ridden near 40 miles, to request me to dispose of the Corn on his plantation (about 300 bushels) to the people in such quantities as they needed and to give to such as had no means of purchasing. And, on Friday morning, Dr. Bonneau, who was about removing his family, made the same request

* The manuscript letter is in the possession of Mrs. Courtenay Tew Lindsay of Deland, Florida. The following note is found on the end cover: "A narrative of events attending the evacuation of Sullivans Island as witnessed at Mount Pleasant prepared for the information of my children."